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COBALT-SERIES

マリア様がみてる

ウァレンティーヌスの贈り物(後編)

今野緒雪



集英社

Volume 6

Valentine's Gift - Part 2

Order

Part 1.

It had just been a slight slip of the tongue.

So she had no great expectation that she would receive an OK.
Nevertheless.

“Date?”

Sachiko-sama's eyes widened for an instant and she looked at Yumi (well, that's to be expected – even the one who said it was surprised) then smiled and said, “That sounds like fun.”

“Eh?” Yumi was taken aback. As though the commotion in her heart was being faithfully played out on her body, she jerked backwards, almost scattering the painstakingly gathered “Surprise Chocolates” once more.

Valentine's Day evening.

The treasure hunt organized by the newspaper club had finished, and a number of other things besides, until at last the two of them were alone on the second floor of the Rose Mansion.

There had been a slight accident and the chocolate box had erupted, and it was all so unexpected she wanted to close her eyes.

The problem was with what Yumi had jokingly blurted out to try and smooth things over.

Lacking anything else to say, she had said it was a game of hit or miss. How on earth did she have the nerve to smoothly say such a random thing.

As a consequence, she was asked what the prize for getting a hit was, and her own wish of “A ticket for a date together” came flying out of her mouth. Overcoming her shock, she was feeling quite pleased with herself.

Even still, Sachiko-sama's reaction was a surprise. Or, rather, Yumi hadn't been expecting any reaction at all, since she had said what popped into her mind.

Instead, Sachiko was asking her questions about it.

"When?"

"Ummm."

It seemed like they really would be going on a date. If Sachiko was simply being diplomatic, she would have followed up 'That sounds like fun' with 'some day.'

Back to the problem.

While Yumi was overjoyed at the prospect of going on a date with Sachiko, she hadn't been planning this at all. She was just saying whatever came to mind.

"Well, how about next Sunday?"

Once more, Yumi was just going with the flow.

To the question of 'when,' the first thing that came to her mind was the date on the tickets that were the special prize in the newspaper club's treasure hunt. And so just like that, thank you for the help newspaper club, but I'll be taking that. You could even say it was fitting, given that it had been the newspaper club's plan that had lit the fire of her desire to go on a date with her onee-sama.

"Sunday? That's fine."

Sachiko-sama had not turned her down.

Thinking about it, Sachiko-sama would have blocked off that day for the date with whoever found her hidden, red card. But with the card now invalid, her schedule would have opened up.

"Where will we go?"

"...Umm, I'm thinking of a couple of places."

Confusion.

"Ahh, onee-sama, if there's somewhere you'd like to go..."

"There's nowhere in particular. Wherever you want to go will be fine."

Ah, that type of answer was the most painful. If Sachiko had given something specific about where she wanted to go, it would have been easy. But as the one who brought it up, it was up to Yumi to come up with a plan. But first she had to weather the storm here somehow. If her deceit unraveled, it may not be just the date itself that comes to nothing.

“Well, I’ll come up with a list of several destinations by tomorrow.”

“Oh well.”

Sachiko-sama looked out the window. Yumi followed her gaze. The sun had long since set, but a light snow was falling so it was somewhat bright.

“I’m looking forward to it.”

Taking hold of her school coat that was hanging over a chair, Sachiko-sama smiled. “Shall we go home?”

It was already well past the time for leaving school.

After stuffing the box of chocolates into her bag, Yumi followed Sachiko-sama out of the room.

Rosa Gigantea and Shimako-san, who she had supposed were still on the lower floor, were no longer there.

Part 2.

Shimako realized she had left her mittens in the classroom just as she was returning her indoor shoes to the shoe box. She hesitated for a moment over whether or not to go back for them. It was cold outside, plus she didn't really like leaving things behind.

But.

"What's up?"

Her onee-sama greeted her, having returned from the third year's shoe boxes. "Nothing" was her response, and she hurriedly closed the shoe box.

"It's cold, isn't it."

Leaving the entrance, the night air stung her exposed skin. It felt like it was snowing intermittently, but it didn't seem to be building up. She had brought a folding umbrella, but the two of them walked along without opening it. It was just too lovely, with the leaves of the bushes and the light reflecting off the thinly falling snow that seemed to act as a veil around the deserted pathway.

"Oh yeah. Shizuka gave me some chocolate bon-bons. That might warm us up a bit."

As she said this, she was rummaging around in her pockets, searching for them.

"Onee-sama, that's a bit inconsiderate."

Shimako let out a sigh.

"Why so? I'll give you some too, Shimako."

"That's not what I was saying."

"I see. It was mentioning Shizuka's name in front of you. But, okay. It's still true that I received some chocolates. So there's no problem with store bought bon-bons."

So come now, eat up, she urged as she offered up the small, open box she retrieved from her pocket. Inside was a neat row of five chocolate bon-bons, individually wrapped in silver paper. There was a gap about the size of a bon-bon, probably from where she had unwrapped one and tasted it in front of Shizuka-sama.

“No, what I was saying was - “

Shimako made a gesture of refusal, as she turned to look straight into Rosa Gigantea’s eyes.

“What I was saying was, what about Shizuka-sama’s feelings, onee-sama?”

“Huh?”

“If you were to share the present she gave you with me... If Shizuka-sama knew of this, how do you think she would feel?”

“Shizuka’s feelings?”

Rosa Gigantea stopped walking and looked down in thought, then, at length, raised her head and smiled.

“I see. You’re right. I’ve learned something.”

The small box of chocolate bon-bons was once again returned to her coat pocket.

If it had been an act of kindness to try them in front of the giver of the present, then it had also been an act of kindness not to eat one when her little sister was showing self-restraint.

Shimako’s onee-sama, Rosa Gigantea, was sensitive, had good intuition and was a very kind person, even if she had done something a bit inconsiderate.

“I’m sorry if I sounded patronizing.”

“Not at all. I think I’m fortunate to have such a conscientious little sister. I can be relaxed about...”

“Please don’t say it.”

Graduation was the word that Shimako was afraid Rosa Gigantea would say before she interrupted.

“When onee-sama leaves, I’ll definitely...”

With her equilibrium thrown off balance, her thoughts had become scattered and Shimako was unable to finish her sentence.

“You’ll be fine. Everyone loves you, Shimako. The world is a much easier place to live in than you think. When I leave, you’ll definitely become even stronger. So my work here is done. My leaving here won’t be an ordeal for you, Shimako, but the start of a journey for both of us.”

“I can’t think of it like that at all.”

“You will be able to think of it like that, definitely. Spring will come, summer will come... You’ll be busy with your daily school life and notice that it’s normal that I’m not there. When you start your second year, there will be new first years to take our place. When that happens, Lillian’s will be filled with students.”

“But...!”

Onee-sama won’t be among the new first years. Shimako swallowed her words. Even if she said it, there was nothing that could be done about it and she didn’t want to embarrass Rosa Gigantea.

Certainly, she had become good friends with her fellow first years, Yumi-san and Yoshino-san. And although they were in different grades, she had become close with her fellow boutons, Sachiko-sama and Rei-sama.

Still, none of them were Satō Sei.

And none of the new first years would be Satō Sei either.

In the whole world, the Satō Sei in front of her was the only one. There was no-one else who could take her place.

“What’s the matter? This isn’t like you, Shimako.”

“I’m sorry.”

“There’s no need to apologize. Now then, what should I do?”

Rosa Gigantea gently wiped away Shimako’s tears that had been falling unnoticed before speaking.

“Should I embrace you, like during the election? If you wish, I’ll give you a kiss or anything else.”

“That’s enough.”

Shimako shook her head.

That Rosa Gigantea had said that to her was enough.

The two of them were well matched. Therefore, they didn’t get too close. Closeness, fawning over each other, would just be re-opening each other’s wounds.

In this way, Rosa Gigantea was Shimako's guardian. When Shimako seemed hurt, this was how Rosa Gigantea would comfort her. In looking at each other, it was as though they were looking into a mirror, and they saw their own existence.

So Shimako's wish was only that Rosa Gigantea would be by her side. If she could look at Rosa Gigantea, that was enough. She didn't want to be held close.

"Really, what should I do? You seem a bit uneasy today."

Shimako wiped away the remaining traces of her tears from her cheeks with her left hand, and put on a smile. In a slightly self-deprecating way. But Rosa Gigantea didn't laugh.

"Your gloves."

"Huh?"

"What happened to your gloves? You always wear them, right?"

"Ahh."

The time to recall had arrived.

"I seem to have left them in the classroom. What with the treasure hunt, and the commotion in the evening."

"Hold out your hand."

"Huh?"

"The commotion was the cause? I think it must have been me."

Rosa Gigantea swiftly grasped Shimako's empty left hand and put it into her coat pocket. Not the left side pocket she had put Shizuka's chocolates in, the right side one.

"Onee-sama."

"The marble cake was incredibly delicious."

After giving Shimako's hand, still inside her pocket a tight squeeze, Rosa Gigantea slowly walked off. Shimako too walked off, as her hand was still held inside Rosa Gigantea's pocket. Although their temperature was probably the same, Rosa Gigantea's hand felt very warm. And somehow Rosa Gigantea's pocket felt warmer than her own, even though they were made from the same material.

As they walked along, they had a conversation about matters unrelated to graduation. Rosa Gigantea steered the conversation towards food, probably because she was hungry.

When they arrived at Maria-sama's statue, Shimako made as if to stop, while Rosa Gigantea tugged on her hand, a little forcibly.

"Onee-sama?"

"That's enough for today."

Without waiting for a response, she walked off in silence. It was as though she wanted to leave this place without even a second's delay.

"..."

Somehow comprehending Rosa Gigantea's mental state, Shimako accompanied her in silence. As a result, today was the first day she had not performed the custom of praying in front of the statue of Maria-sama.

It seemed like Shimako's uneasiness was being reflected.

When they arrived at the bus stop, outside the school gates, Rosa Gigantea let out a sigh and finally returned to normal.

Part 3.

“I hadn’t really thought about it, because she didn’t receive any other than mine.”

Yoshino-san sighed.

“And how many do you think Rei-chan received?”

“...A decent catch.”

“Darn right, a decent catch. Fisherman will be lining up to dance with her, with a catch this big.”

It was a different kind of catch though. But pointing this out would only double Yoshino-san’s grumbling, so she didn’t say anything.

The Rose Mansion, on the day after all the excitement.

It was lunch time, and the boutons were having a lunch meeting with Minako-sama from the newspaper club. They stopped by to say this, then headed out to the newspaper club’s clubhouse for a review of the event.

And so, just as before, Yumi and Yoshino-san were left by themselves. On the table, Yoshino-san had an over-sized paper bag from which she pulled out box after box, all apparently full of chocolates.

“Those are all for Rei-sama?”

“Yep. Since Rei-chan’s so popular.”

This time, she wasn’t saying that fondly. But, still, Yumi refrained from pointing this out. When started, Yoshino-san’s “Rei-chan material” went on and on and on.

“I thought I’d at least be able to commiserate with Yumi-san, who’d be in the same position as me, but what happens? Sachiko-sama doesn’t accept chocolates from anyone other than Yumi-san.”

“I humbly apologize. For my fastidious onee-sama.”

Coming from Yumi, it was filled with love.

“Oh, is that what you call it. In that case, my onee-sama is overly kind.”

“Aww, how sweet...”

“Same to you.”

The pair turned to each other and bowed in thanks. Well, they had just finished eating their lunches, so it did have the proper appearance.

“So how come you have all these chocolates for Rei-sama?”

“Why indeed? Rei-chan’s collector gave them to me.”

“Collector?”

“Like, yesterday, the boutons were busy, yeah? So it’d be hard for them to deal with everyone individually. So somebody took charge of being the collector for Rei-chan. They were going to present them after the treasure hunt, but Rei-chan skipped out straight afterwards.”

“Hmmm.”

“So they gave them to me, because they couldn’t catch her. By handing them off to me, I would undoubtedly be able to get them to Rei-chan that day.”

“I see...”

Plus, Yumi thought, by using Yoshino-san as the intermediary, they didn’t have to put up with her on the way home.

Even if you didn’t know how scary Yoshino truly was, surely they would have some hesitation in giving chocolate to someone with a *petite sœur*. As for Yoshino-san, it was probably much better for her to be given a single bag with all the chocolates, rather than publicly be given them one at a time.

Still, is such a business-like approach really appropriate on this once-a-year memory making opportunity?

“It’s good, don’t you think?”

Yoshino unfolded the report writing paper she had brought along with her lunch, and started writing some kind of list.

“Really?”

“Yeah, it’s best that they can make the “I gave you chocolates” appeal to Rei-chan. It’s not like she’s Rosa Gigantea, no-one has huge expectations of Rei-chan.”

As Yoshino-san was speaking, she was also picking up the presents one-by-one, carefully looking at the wrapping paper as though inspecting them, then jotting something down on the report writing paper, for some reason or another.

“Oh, how fortunate. Everyone’s name and class is written in a visible location. The collector must have made sure of that. Even though I’m her petite sœur, I still wouldn’t open anything addressed to Rei-chan.”

She had been grumbling, things like ‘Oh look, someone from our class,’ when something silenced her.

“Umm, Yoshino-san. What the heck are you doing?”

Yumi thought it rude to interrupt, but she had become concerned and asked.

“Huh? Oh, I’m making a list. Silly Rei-chan, on White Day she’ll give return gifts to all of them.” As she continued her task, Yoshino-san sighed once more.

It seems that on Valentine’s Day last year, despite only being a first year, Rei-sama received a number of chocolates. Because it was Rei-sama, she gladly accepted them. Then, on White Day, she made a batch of cookies and candies, and went around and gave them to the people she had received gifts from. So those who were jealous about missing out last year had joined in this year, and so the decent catch.

Apparently Yoshino-san wasn’t depressed about Rei-sama’s popularity, so much as fed up with both the effort of making the list of the stack of chocolate, and thinking about Rei-chan conscientiously making sweets in one month’s time. It was rough on the petite sœur who had to follow such a broad minded onee-sama like Rei-sama.

Thinking she should do something to help, Yumi lined up the scattered presents on the table so that the names were visible when, suddenly.

“Uwaaaah.”

Yoshino-san cried out.

“What is it?” When Yumi hastily looked up, Yoshino-san remained frozen, looking at the package she held in her hand.

“I saw an unpleasant name.”

Yumi asked, “Which one?” and came over beside her to take a look.

“Tanuma Chisato?”

Who was she?

At times like this, Yumi was cursed with insufficient personal information. She’d heard that name somewhere before. Probably a first year, but she couldn’t distinctly remember a face.

“So for Yumi-san, you don’t mind who the other person is.”

“ - Which means for Yoshino-san, she’s an undesirable partner... Ahh!”

“You’ve got it. She’s Rei-chan’s partner for the date.”

Her memories of yesterday came back – Yoshino-san clicking her tongue, grinding her teeth, stamping her feet on the floor and even raising her voice a little. At any rate, it had been very easy to see the chagrin written all over her face.

Yoshino-san had almost made it to the end-game, but had not been able to find Rei-sama’s hidden card. In a come from behind victory it went to Tanuma Chisato-san’s group. That by itself was vexing, but what made it twice as bad was that they were the girls that had been shadowing Yoshino-san along the way.

Really, she looked like she wanted to rip that present apart, or spit on it, but at sixteen her judgment told her that she couldn’t do that.

“Well then.”

Having let her feelings out, Yoshino-san matter-of-factly jotted down her rival’s name and returned the present to the paper bag.

“What is it?”

Yoshino-san asked, noticing Yumi's gaze.

"You seem to be handling this quite well."

"Well, of course. It's not good for your health to store up bad feelings. And if you spit it out, you can't change that you'll have to suck it up a second time... Especially now, no matter how I think about it, it's unjustified resentment. And that's not a good thing to carry around."

"Incredible. I understand."

"Well yeah, we've been hanging around each other for a while."

But don't get me wrong, I'm not concerned about whether other people can see this, Yoshino-san said. Hearing this, Yumi was a bit gladdened. Because she heard it as 'I can confide in you.'

She didn't take pleasure in finding fault with other people, but remembering the words that Rosa Chinensis once spoke, "Friends are there to take up such unpleasant duties," she thought that perhaps this was what she meant. Of course, there was a friendship between them, so this was excusable.

"Yoshino-san"

"What?"

"Let's stay good friends forever."

Letting out a giggle as she tried to cope with the surprise attack, Yoshino-san went a bit red in the face and said, seemingly a bit angrily.

"Wh... What are you thinking, saying that, Yumi-san?"

Averting her gaze with all her might, Yumi focused on the table. As for Yoshino-san, she forced herself to resume drawing up her list.

"You don't have to feel shy."

"It's not shyness."

Yoshino-san raised her head and retaliated with a glare.

“Well then, why don’t you respond? I like you, Yoshino-san, so I want to be good friends with you, like the Roses... Or do you dislike me?”

When Yumi asked this, Yoshino-san’s guarded expression loosened, but she took on a serious look.

“...I don’t dislike you, okay.”

“Then, you like me?”

“Yumi-san, how is it that you can say these things and not be embarrassed.”

“It’s not something I could say in front of Sachiko-sama.”

“Ehh, I could say this as much as I want to Rei-chan. I could say anything to her.”

For both of them, it changed. What they could say when facing their *sœur*. Once more, the two of them burst into laughter simultaneously. The style may be different, but again they matched quite well.

Yoshino-san stood up and held out her hand.

“I look forward to working with you.”

Yumi also stood up and held out her hand.

“Likewise.”

In the air above the chocolates that were spread out over the table, the two right hands were tightly joined.

They may be a way off from an adult friendship like the Roses, but at least they had a target, so they should be able to build a good friendship. If the occupants of the Rose Mansion remained as they were, her second and third years would also be spent associating with Yoshino-san.

“Now that we’ve confirmed our friendship, can I ask you a question?”

Yumi said, as they were still shaking hands.

“What?”

“It’s about the date.”

“What’s with that.”



Yoshino-san started with a dubious expression, then muttered, fed up with it.

“I don’t want to remember such an unpleasant thing.”

Part 4.

“And? Can you tell me?”

In the break between fifth and sixth period, Tsutako-san had her glasses and her camera lined up upon her desk, and was using a special cloth to clean them both.

“I’ll answer your questions, but it won’t be very helpful.”

“Maybe so. Why do you think that?”

“Yumi-san, why is it that you always make a mistake in choosing your research partner?”

“Ehh.”

“Not ‘Ehh.’ Yoshino-san and Rei-sama are like real sisters, right?”

“Real sisters.”

People that were born to the same parents and live together, she’s trying to say. Certainly, the two of them are cousins so they’re blood related, and they live as neighbors on the same premises so they are quite close.

“Look up ‘date’ in a dictionary, and what will you find? Well, there will be meanings like a day in a year, or determining the age of something, but the nuance closest to what we’re using is ‘a promise to meet.’”

Tsutako-san wasn’t wearing her glasses, so she had an unfamiliar face. On top of that, her eyes were narrowed, so it felt like she was talking to a different person.

“...date.”

d a t e.

To confirm this, she took her Japanese-English dictionary out of her desk and looked up ‘date.’ Certainly, ‘a promise to meet’ was there. Incidentally, ‘tryst’ was alongside it.

Tryst.

Now she needed her regular dictionary.

Yumi was going to get her dictionary, but Tsutako-san lent Yumi hers. The words of the editor were ‘When people who are in love with each other secretly meet.’ This was close to one of Tsutako-san’s favorite words, ‘rendezvous,’ but unfortunately there wasn’t a Japanese-French dictionary nearby so she gave up at that point.

“Do you understand?”

Having finished wiping her glasses, Tsutako-san smiled with her normal face.

“A date is, essentially, a prearranged time that people will go out. Yumi-san, when you go out with your mother, do you say that’s a date? You don’t call it that, right?”

“Ahh, I get it. And Yoshino-san and Rei-sama are like family.”

“Exactly. And they’re on such intimate terms that they almost certainly do go out together. And sometimes they’d make plans to meet up outside, but they’re inoculated to it, so they can’t offer any advice to Yumi-san who’s got the jitters about her ‘first outing with just the two of us.’”

“I see.”

Certainly, Yoshino-san had replied with an extremely displeased attitude, and the reason the contents of the reply were of no use to her fitted with what had just been said.

When she asked “What should I do?” the response was “Well, that depends on where you go.” To the question of “So where should I go?” the counterattack was “First, what’s your objective for going out?” In Yoshino-san’s case, they didn’t need to go out to meet each other, so there was no cause to worry about where they should go.

After the first Valentine’s Day was the first date.

But Yoshino-san’s first with Rei-sama was most likely completed a long time ago, so asking her for advice had been a mistake from the outset.

“I’d like to do a dry-run beforehand, but the real thing is next Sunday so I won’t have time.”

Tsutako-san offered up some kind words, but despite what she said, Yumi was running out of time.

“By the way, Yumi-san, what experience do you have with dates up until now. How about you use that as a frame of reference.”

The flash didn’t go off, but the shutter clicked.

You usually asked someone before taking their picture, but Tsutako-san didn’t play by the rules.

“I guess you could call that shrine visit with Rosa Gigantea a date.”

“Ahh, that. I would have loved to have taken hidden camera photos of it. Why wouldn’t you say that was a date?”

“I haven’t called it that until now.”

There must be some dreadful word you call someone who can say ‘hidden camera photos’ so boldly. She would never be able to relax and enjoy a shrine visit now, instead wondering where a camera might be set up.

“I’ve got it. I’ll tell you the course for the best date ever.”

Tsutako-san returned her camera to the desk, and clapped her hands as though she had just been struck by a brilliant idea.

“...I get it too. You plan to lie in wait on this course and secretly take photos of us, right?”

“Hahaha.”

It seems like Yumi’s inference was right on the mark.

“It’s not something to laugh about. Give me a break.”

The sixth period would be starting soon, so Yumi turned to go back to her own seat. That’s when Tsutako-san grabbed her by the wrist and told her to stop.

“Ahh, wait up.”

“What, you’ve had another brilliant idea?”

“Someone else. It wouldn’t hurt you to ask them.”

When she heard this, Yumi retraced her steps. Tsutako-san would tell her who would be a suitable advisor on this matter. After Tsutako-san said ‘lend me your ears,’ Yumi brought her ear close to Tsutako-san’s mouth.

“Shimako-san.”

“Heh?”

“Try to ask her. She’s also having her first date on Sunday.”

“Ah...!”

She had completely forgotten.

Shimako-san would somehow have to go on a date with her rival for Rosa Gigantea, Kanina Shizuka-sama.

Of course it would be her first date.

Moreover, the newspaper club would be sweating on their plans.

It would be a good idea to ask her, so Yumi gave a huge nod just as the bell for sixth period rang.

Part 5.

“You say that, but.”

As soon as Shimako-san heard her situation, she had a face that said “I won’t be able to live up to your expectations.”

Sixth period class, home room, and then cleaning – a fair wait before she could at last ask her question. Yumi had caught Shimako-san in the corridor on the way to the Rose Mansion and dragged her to a staircase landing.

“Even though we’re the prize for the dates, it doesn’t mean that we decide on the course for the date. The prize winner and the boutons will discuss this, and then decide on where to go.”

As though the exhaustion of yesterday was still with her, Shimako-san had a listless air about her.

“Is that so?”

“Yes. It’s not something we’re taking lightly, but it’s causing all kinds of difficulties.”

She surreptitiously sighed. Shimako-san’s exhaustion probably wasn’t solely because of past events but also mixed with mental fatigue from thinking about what they had just been discussing.

The head of the newspaper club, Tsukiyama Minako-sama wasn’t an ordinary person, after all.

She wasn’t satisfied with getting just a single special edition out of her massively hyped Valentine’s Day plan. Since she had been willing to go as far as to invest spare money from their budget into this plan, it was only natural that she would seek some kind of equivalent repayment.

“Perhaps it’s harder on the winners than on us. They have to do a report on the date.”

“Ehhhh.”

Submitting a report. Will they really be able to enjoy their much anticipated date while carrying such a heavy burden? She thought that if she had found the red card, she would be able to enjoy the date to her heart's content, but it seems like the prize is quite a chore. Especially for someone like Yumi, who dreaded report writing, she thought it was just as well she had missed the card at that time.

“Minako-sama’s reasoning is that, it’s regrettable, but it’s the duty of the winner to share with those participants whom victory eluded... Although I think that’s just a front.”

“And her real reason would be? Does she intend to use this event for every issue?”

“I think it may just be that. Although I do find it unpleasant that the date will be offered up to the students in such a mercenary manner. The conditions imposed were that the boutons will account for the total money spent and the prize winner would submit a report about the day. For the time being, this is because the date’s expenses will be covered by the newspaper club’s budget.”

“Expenses...? Uwaa!?”

Yumi suddenly cried out. They were on a landing, so her voice echoed up and down the stairway.

“What’s the matter?”

Uwaa, uwaa, uwaa, uwaa..... As her voice echoed, Yumi squatted down.

“What an idiot.”

“Eh?”

Having no idea what was going on, Shimako-san also squatted down and looked into Yumi’s eyes.

“Until now, that hadn’t even occurred to me.”

“That?”

The date's expenses. Initially she had been provoked by the treasure hunt's prize of a half-day date into inviting Sachiko-sama to a date, but she hadn't actually obtained the privilege of being the true winner. In short, this was a private and independent event, so she was in charge of everything related to it.

Where to go, the date's expenses, and so on.

As the one who did the asking out, should she pay for everything or should they split the expenses? About how much would be necessary? Where should she raise the money from?

"Ahh, geeze."

Her head felt like it would crack just from thinking about it.

At any rate, this kind of conversation about money could spoil the romantic mood, so she wanted to try to avoid it. Especially while there was this kind of distance between her and Sachiko-sama.

"By the way, the date's expenses, about how much will they be?"

Having come this far, she had no choice but to ask this. Having picked out the only part that could serve as a reference, she could come up with a plan. At any rate, this was data that she was lacking.

"It's 3,000 yen."

"3,000 yen?"

That's 3 Natsume-san's.

"That's per group, not per person?"

"Yeah."

Shimako-san stretched her back and nodded.

3,000 yen.

Since she had never been on a real date, Yumi had no idea whether that was a lot or a little.

"At the very least, you can't go to Disneyland with that much money."

"And if you see a movie, there's not enough for lunch."

For Shimako-san, it seems that a date = a movie. But that's definitely the sort of image you would get when you heard the phrase 'first date'. And afterwards to a café. Due to the budget, she would have to pass on the amusement park this time.

However. She didn't want to go to a movie theater somewhere within range of their commuter pass, watch a movie, and then say "Goodbye." You could call that a film festival, but not a date.

So now that she'd learned all this, what should she do?

"But first of all, I think I have to have a discussion with Shizuka-sama."

Shimako-san stood up, and straightened the hem of her skirt. Left squatting by herself on the landing, Yumi also stood up. One of her legs had gone to sleep.

"Are you okay?"

Shimako-san lent Yumi a hand, for which she was grateful, supporting her while she grabbed the staircase's railing.

As she was looking over her shoulder, Yumi thought she could see Shimako-san's white sigh.

"Shimako-san, are you depressed about something?"

At which point Shimako-san, who looked like she had been caught doing something wrong, said 'Oh', and smiled.

"It's a bit different to what you just said. It's about Shizuka-sama – it's not that I hate her, it's just..."

"It's just?"

"It's just that I can't even imagine what Shizuka-sama is planning on doing."

Yumi wanted to lend her some strength, but she couldn't imagine either.

Part 6.

“What am I planning, huh?”

Shizuka-sama put on a slightly evil looking face and smiled.

“Yumi-san, who told you to come here? Shimako-san? Or maybe Sachiko-san?”

Thump.

“No, it’s not like that. Nobody sent me here.”

Hastily, Yumi swung her hand over her heart and vehemently denied it.

“Oh? Is that so?”

“Yes, of course. It would be a stain on my honor to do such a thing to Shizuka-sama.”

Her intended grin turned into an insincere smile. What she was saying wasn’t a lie, but she was feeling a little bit guilty after all. She broke out into a cold sweat.

After she parted from Shimako-san, Yumi returned to her classroom to pick up her bag and coat. In the first floor hallway she had spotted Shizuka-sama, who must surely have been on her way home, and without thinking had chased after her and caught her at the entrance. That was all. Although, to be honest, if it hadn’t been for Shimako-san’s sigh, she probably wouldn’t have called out to Shizuka-sama.

But Shizuka-sama wasn’t conducting a detailed investigation. She smiled good-naturedly and said, “Well that’s okay then.” That was how Yumi had wanted to smile just recently, so her feelings were somewhat complicated.

Students on their way home were passing around them. So as not to be a bother, they moved to one of the closed doors before Shizuka-sama gave her answer to the initial question.

“What am I planning? Well, nothing. I’m neither a god, nor a magician nor do I have ESP, so of course I didn’t know where Shimako-san had hidden her card. Therefore, my finding it was just a co-incidence. Mere chance.”

“Haa.”

Shimako-san’s hidden white card. It had been put up on the committee notice board. She had only heard this afterwards, but while Sachiko-sama had arrived early in the morning and took the time to bury her card in the ground herself, Rei-sama and Shimako-san’s cards were hidden by a first year newspaper club member moments before the treasure hunt started. While the participants were gathered in the courtyard and having the rules explained to them. Since Shizuka-sama was participating in the treasure hunt, she obviously didn’t have an opportunity to witness Shimako-san hiding her card.

“I have a question though, what made you think of taking part in the treasure hunt in the first place?”

“Why, indeed. To be brief, it seemed like fun, I guess.”

“It seemed like fun?”

“It seemed like fun, didn’t it? I was hungry for some festivities at this school, you could say. I definitely made some happy memories this Valentine’s Day that I can take with me to Italy.”

Shizuka-sama said that her school life had always been centered around singing, so she hadn’t been able to participate with her class in school festivals and the like. So her goal wasn’t really to get a date with one of the boutons but simply to have fun with everyone, she said. Was that really it?

But, what if it was? To be safe, she would have been looking for her classmates Sachiko-sama and Rei-sama’s cards. If she had chanced upon it, as she claimed, wouldn’t it have been better to hand it over to someone who desired Shimako-san’s card. Despite being a first year, Shimako-san was popular as a bouton. She was admired by her classmates, but there were also a lot of second years who would like to make her their petite sœur.

“I thought it would cause an uproar if I found Shimako-san’s card, so I aimed for it from the beginning. But I never thought I would actually find it.”

“An uproar, huh.”

To cause an uproar, huh, Yumi grumbled in her mind. The person who tried to usurp Shimako-san’s role as a Rose in the student council elections got a date with her.

What does it all mean?

“So I’m incredibly satisfied.”

Shizuka-sama made the peace-sign with her right hand, which wasn’t holding her bag.

“So, about the date with Shimako-san.”

“Of course I’m going. It’s going to be super fun.”

The tone she said that in wasn’t thoughtless, like Yumi’s, but it seemed like the number of people mistakenly wondering whether Shizuka-sama liked Shimako-san would increase.

I’m sorry, Shimako-san. – Yumi prayed silently.

I have absolutely no idea what Shizuka-sama is thinking.

Hors D'oeuvre

Part 1.

Sunday. 10:40 am.

Outside the second floor ticket gate in the station building of the JR line's K station stood Yumi. But why was there a figure beside her of a young girl with a tiny camera that seemed like it was a part of her hand? – If anyone doesn't already know, 'Camera-chan' is Miss Takeshima Tsutako.

Even though it was the weekend the station was still crowded with people. K station had many ticket gates, but Yumi had chosen this one because it looked the least cold. And because it was so narrow, it should be easy to find her partner. She had not anticipated that it would be this congested.

"You know, it's pointless waiting here with me. Sachiko-sama won't come for another 20 minutes."

The agreed upon time was 11am. Sachiko-sama wasn't the type of person to be late, but neither was she the type of person to get excited and leave home early. Like Yumi had today.

"Don't you worry about me. As soon as we find Sachiko-sama, I'll leave your side."

And then take pictures from the shadows. That was Yumi's perspective on what Tsutako-san was thinking.

"Anyway, how did you know that it would be here?"

Yumi hadn't told anybody. And Sachiko-sama wasn't the type to talk about it.

"To tell you the truth, it was only a co-incidence that I found you, Yumi-san. Actually, I'm here to watch the white and yellow dates."

"Ehh?"

"Although this is a secret"

Tsutako-san lowered her voice. But is it okay to let others in on a secret conversation?

“I was commissioned by Minako-sama from the newspaper club. ‘Would you be able to get me at least a two-shot of each of them,’ she asked. Ahh, you have heard that each of the winners will submit a report on how the date went, right?”

“Yeah”

Yumi nodded. She had caught that from talking with Shimako-san.

“The report will be published in the date special edition of the Lillian Kowaraban. So it would be better to have some photographs as evidence, to make it more real. The newspaper club’s president is definitely wandering somewhere around here clutching a disposable camera too.”

They hadn’t been able to get any information about the date’s course in advance, so it seems a number of the newspaper club’s members were taking the trip. “We can’t pay you anything, but we’d be glad to have you along,” was apparently how they invited Tsutako-san. Well, she was elated by that anyway.

“So this is a secret from Rei-sama and Shimako-san?”

“It would be rude to bother them. Before they’re put in the paper, I’ll make sure to get their full consent.”

“Uhuh...”

Is that okay? It feels a bit wrong. She wanted to protest, but her opponent was Tsutako-san, who had been invited to join the debating club. She could eloquently and skillfully win you around.

So, she changed the conversation.

“Why K station?”

“The location has to clear the requirements that you can get there using your commuter pass, and there’s enough to do to keep you interested for half a day. The first place that comes to mind is here, right?”

“I see.”

Although Rei-sama, who walks to school, doesn't have a commuter pass, she can get here by a single bus. Above all, because everything has to be done for 3,000 yen, going somewhere nearby was important.

"In other words, Yumi-san racked her brain and squeezed out a location that everyone would think of."

"...Damn it."

In that case, if they met a lot of people they knew while walking around, there was a possibility that they could encounter something a little bit embarrassing. Like another pair on a date... Or, worst of all, a group secretly taking photographs.

"– Not only that. K station is like a garden to students from our school. They could just be here shopping on their day off. Or they could be people-watching."

"Cut it out."

"Of course, nobody would have heard a rumor about Yumi-san and Sachiko-sama having a date today in the vicinity of K station. But it's common knowledge that Rosa Foetida en Bouton and Rosa Gigantea en Bouton will be having their dates today. It was bad timing to have it on the same day."

"Are you getting involved in the show?"

"I'm bleeding for my audience, the whole of Lillian's Girls Academy."

"Uwaa"

Yumi hid her face behind her hands. Without thinking, she tried to squat but barely managed to survey her surroundings.

She wanted to leap over to that pay telephone and call Sachiko-sama's house right away. To change the location. But looking at the clock, it was already 10:50am. However much she may have liked to do that, Sachiko-sama probably wasn't in her house now.

"Well, it'll be alright. The sightseers won't be looking to make direct contact with you either."

Tsutako-san softly patted the crestfallen Yumi on the shoulder. It's okay. The words of consolation didn't really console her.

"Ooooh. Nice photo opportunity!"

Tsutako-san seemed to scream the words, then turned towards the first floor plaza in the station building and clicked the shutter. This area was an atrium, so if you lent over the edge you could see the entire first floor.

"What's happening?"

When Yumi asked, Tsutako-san seemed to be quite busy, as she answered while pressing the shutter.

"Rosa Foetida en Bouton has made her entrance. A while ago Miss Tanuma Chisato was in the plaza, so I've been scoping it out."

It seems that Tsutako-san had taken up position here, using the ticket gate as a pretext, while her real goal had been to watch over the plaza. She must have been thinking that if there was somewhere that had a complete view of Tanuma Chisato-san, she could keep lookout from there.

"Now to get closer for one more."

Tsutako-san waved bye-bye, then descended the staircase.

Watching on from above, she saw Rei-sama, who had entered the plaza draw close to Chisato-san. They greeted each other a little nervously.

Thank you for taking the time today.

No, no, thank you. Let's enjoy ourselves.

– Like that. She felt like she could almost hear the words just from the mood.

Despite the cold, Chisato-san had taken off her coat and had been waiting in an incredibly cute red, white and pink frilly dress. She was going all out for this date, based on her clothes.

And, in comparison, I'm – Yumi thought. Last night she had done a fashion show, alternating between different clothes before eventually settling on a sweater and jeans with her usual duffel coat. When her mother learned that she was going out with her onee-sama, she offered to lend her a suit, or a dress, or a kimono, or anything else but Yumi thought it wouldn't be fitting to wear something that she wasn't accustomed to wearing.

Besides, meeting the extremely stylish Sachiko-sama like that would be, to put it bluntly, really embarrassing. To have it be completely obvious that she had poured all her energy into this would be a bit unsightly.

(However)

Watching Chisato-san, her thoughts changed. Going all out in her effort to select her clothing would also have been sweet, after all.

Like a gentleman, Rei-sama put Chisato-san's coat on her, and they exited the station building via the escalator. Some distance away, Tsutako-san was also visible as she tailed after them.

"Yumi"

The voice greeted her from behind, and when she hurriedly turned around there was Sachiko-sama.

"What ever is the matter?"

Imitating Yumi, Sachiko-sama peeked down on the first floor. For some reason or another, she smelled nice.

"Umm, ahh, just now"

"Just now?"

"I thought I saw an acquaintance."

Yumi prevaricated. Because she didn't want Sachiko-sama to hear about what she had learned from Tsutako-san. She wouldn't enjoy the date at all if she knew that somewhere, someone was probably watching.

"An acquaintance? Is it okay to leave without saying hello to them?"

"Yeah, it was probably a case of mistaken identity."

“Really?”

Without a trace of doubt, Sachiko-sama smiled gently. Like this, she really does resemble Maria-sama, Yumi thought. But Yumi didn’t hate the hysterical, screaming Sachiko-sama either.

“Gokigenyou.”

“Gokigenyou.”

Belatedly, the pair exchanged morning greetings.

Yumi had wondered what she would do if Sachiko-sama had arrived wearing a gorgeous dress, but instead she had a simple outfit made up of a cream colored turtle-neck sweater and a gray, tight skirt that reached to below her knees. But it was by no means plain, you could tell everything was well done just from a single glance. Even the black long-coat that she wore lightly, and the gold, green and white scarf that hung nonchalantly around her neck, and the black leather pumps – . To top it all off, what was inside the clothes was wonderful so it just made her outward appearance look even better.

“Right, right, before I forget”

Sachiko-sama unfastened her leather gloves and took a delicate white envelope out of her black handbag.

“Is it really alright, like this?”

“Yes”

Yumi also took a manila envelope out of her shoulder bag, and put the contents of the two envelopes together.

1,500 yen plus 1,500 yen equaled 3,000 yen. This was the expenses for their date today.

“Really, Yumi, you’re so stubborn.”

“Onee-sama’s the same.”

The two of them started walking away from the ticket gates.

They split the cost at 1,500 yen each. Arriving at this decision had been quite an ordeal.

Yumi had worried about various things, but in the end concluded that since she was the one who asked Sachiko-sama out, it was only natural that she should be the one who would cover the date's expenses.

However, Sachiko-sama said that since she was the onee-sama, she should be the one to pay.

When Yumi insisted that, as the winner of the hit-or-miss game with the chocolates, it would be wrong to make Sachiko-sama pay, Sachiko-sama countered that this was a way of showing appreciation for the chocolates.

So, in the end, they agreed to split the cost down the middle. Sachiko-sama's appreciation for the chocolates would be shown on White Day, and, for now, they were back where they started.

"Ahh, is it okay if I look in here for a little bit?"

Sachiko-sama stepped inside a bookstore.

"I want to buy a dictionary, you see."

"A dictionary?"

"What's with that look? Personal purchases are unrelated to the 3,000 yen, right?"

"That's true, but"

"But?"

"If you buy it now, it will just be extra weight. The bookstore has plenty of them, so how about you buy it just before going home?"

Truthfully, Yumi had also been asked to buy some things by her mother. But they were not the sort of things you would walk around with on a date, so she planned to buy them on the way home after she had parted with Sachiko-sama.

"That's true. Yumi, you're so smart."

That was something that anyone would normally think of. Perhaps Sachiko-sama isn't used to shopping. Perhaps at the shops the Ogasawara family goes to, the goods are delivered to the household. Or maybe, whenever they go shopping outside, they're accompanied by a porter who carries their bags for them.

“Okay then, I’ll get it on the way home.”

And like that, the pair returned to the walkway from a single step inside the bookstore.

(Hmmm...?)

When she turned on her heels, Yumi felt like she saw the reflection of someone she knew out of the corner of her eye.

“What’s the matter?”

Sachiko-sama had started walking and, after a few steps, turned and inquired.

“Nothing.”

Yumi shook her head and caught up. When she had turned and looked again, that person was no longer there.

I wonder who that was.

She had only caught a glance, but she felt it was definitely someone she knew well.

But it wasn’t either Rei-sama, Chisato-san or Tsutako-san.

I wonder who that was.

Part 2.

“Why is Yumi-san here with Sachiko-sama?”

Behind the shelf of reference books, Yoshino murmured to herself.
The K station building’s bookstore.

I wonder if she saw me. No, I quickly hid so I should be fine. Nobody can observe the face of each and every shopper they pass as they walk along. If they could, bounty hunters would have a lot more free time.

(...Either way, it’s not me)

Yoshino shrugged her shoulders and smiled bitterly. Really, she was starting to hate herself. Why on earth did I come to this place?

She could probably loiter around here for a while longer, so she didn’t have to leave the bookstore right away. To kill some time, she took a thin book on chemistry from the bookshelf and flipped through it. It was one of her poorer subjects – she had absolutely no idea what was written in it.

The near miss with Yumi-san had somehow been avoided, so then, what should she do next?

She had already bought the paperback that she had used as a pretext for going out. If she hadn’t, she could go to several places and search for the best looking copy.

(That’s foolish)

It wasn’t a well thought out idea. It was a new release book from a popular writer, so no matter which bookstore she went to she would surely find a stack of mint-condition copies in the New Books corner, just like the one she had now.

Thinking only about Rei-chan being on a date with somebody, she couldn’t just stand idly about and went out. Wanting to show that she was composed, and not burning with jealousy, Yoshino had left the house before Rei-chan and got on the bus to K station. Thanks to that, she had arrived at the station building before it opened.

(Am I a masochist?)

Her usual aggressive self had, for today only, turned timid. Rei-chan hadn't told her where she was going (and she didn't want to hear either). She had, however, anticipated that it would be somewhere near K station so she went to the effort of getting on the bus and coming here to buy her book.

What would she do if she saw Rei-chan and that girl – was it Chisato-san? – walking closely together, chatting?

(But, look, Rei-chan would get engrossed in talking about a subject like kendo and end up talking to herself. When that happens, poor Chisato-san might leave her, so therefore)

Therefore?

She asked herself. Therefore, I came to watch because I'm worried, right?

That was still nothing but a pretext.

Yoshino frankly admitted this. This was jealousy. Nothing other than that.

Before she knew it, they had become too familiar. Rei-chan was always her onee-sama and no-one else's, and the only one who belonged by Rei-chan's side was her. Like during the 'Yellow Rose Revolution.' Although returning the rosary had been a catastrophe, she hadn't believed that it would be the end. It may have been contradictory, but she had believed that it would be a temporary cancellation.

(Jealousy. Being jealous... What's wrong with that?)

However, while she may have accepted that, it did not in any way change the situation. While she was filling in time looking out for them, she couldn't intrude.

Unfortunately, she could only watch them without being spotted. How would it reflect on her if she was caught unawares and suddenly surprised. It would obviously look like she was driven by jealousy to tail them.

That would be a problem. If that happened it would easily tear down her ragged pride, which wasn't set that high to begin with.

(I'll go home. I'll go home and read the book I've bought)

Yes, she nodded to herself and walked off. When she had taken five steps, she realized she was still holding the chemistry book, and returned to the bookshelf.

Those few steps back proved fatal.

"...Yoshino... San?"

"Ehh!?"

Whoa, the sudden surprise had turned into reality, so she took up guard. However, it wasn't Rei-chan and Chisato-san in front of her. And it wasn't Yumi-san and Sachiko-sama again, either.

"Hey, what are you doing here? I knew it, you were worried about Rei-san and Chisato-san being together and came to spy on them, right Yoshino-san?"

Because she was in plain clothes, Yoshino didn't recognize her immediately, but when she took a notebook out of her pocket and started taking notes, Yoshino realized it was the head of the newspaper club.

But, what. It must have been intended as a disguise, for she was wearing a beanie with a pompom that you wouldn't usually see unless skiing, and black-rimmed fake glasses that gave the same impression. Yoshino wanted to inform her that it actually made her even more conspicuous, but... She didn't.

For a start, this person was the one who planned the Valentine's card hunt that caused Rei-chan to have to go on a date with a girl she didn't love.

"Unfortunately for you, I have no interest in that."

Having first replaced the chemistry book on the shelf, Yoshino replied with a composed smile.

“Oh come now, that’s just false bravado. Come to think of it, Yoshino-san was vehemently opposed to this from the start. Naturally, you’re jealous.”

Minako-sama nodded to herself as she reached her conclusion.

“Jealousy, you say –”

Yoshino clenched her fist. Earlier she had realized this herself, but she didn’t want it pointed out by someone else once more. Besides, what was up with her sympathetic looking facial expression? That Minako-sama, she really was good at angering people.

But she couldn’t let herself be provoked here. If she cried out or acted out even a little, an exaggerated version would undoubtedly be printed in the ‘Lillian Kwaraban.’

“Scoop! Yellow Rose Revolution Part Two. Rosa Foetida en Bouton’s petite sœur lashes out due to jealousy” – just picturing the title made her sick.

“You’ve misunderstood, Minako-sama.”

She started off with a smile.

“I don’t know where, or how, my onee-sama is going to be spending today... Well, you say she’s here?”

“Oh please, Yoshino-san, your joke’s not funny.”

“No, it’s true.”

The fox and the racoon’s enchantment. Using refined phrases as armor while probing for your opponent’s true motive.

“Then why did you come to K station today? If you wanted to go to a bookstore, there’s one nearer your house, right?”

“Th... That’s”

Damn it. “I came to buy a book” had been her trump card, but Minako-sama had anticipated this and she couldn’t use it now.

“I was invited by Yumi-san.”

The confusing explanation had flown out of her mouth and couldn’t be taken back.

“Yumi-san?”

“Yeah. Yumi-san was going out with Sachiko-sama and invited me along, saying if I was free, why don’t I join them.”

“Yumi-san and Sachiko-sama!?”

The color of Minako-sama’s eyes changed.

“Ahh!”

Once again, ‘damn it.’ This time it was a fairly big verbal slip. She went to cover her mouth, but it was too late.

Like a dog that had heard his master’s voice, Minako-sama’s invisible antenna was standing up.

Yumi-san and Sachiko-sama’s date was unrelated to the half-day dates organized by the newspaper club, so Minako-sama hadn’t yet caught wind of it.

“So, where are the two of them now?”

“Ehh, ahh.”

It’s just one thing after another.

“They wandered off for a bit. I’m sure they’re still around here somewhere.”

It was a pretty poor excuse. However, Minako-sama didn’t doubt it.

“Yumi-san and Sachiko-sama...”

She murmured, as though digesting it. She had completely shifted her focus to this new information. When you tell a lie, it’s best to mix it with a bit of the truth. Somebody on TV said this, so it must be true.

(Forgive me, Yumi-san)

She implored in her mind. She felt like she had blurted out something unforgivable while acting coy.

What’s done is done.

The words she had spoken could not be returned to her mouth. Having said that, she couldn’t leave the topic of Yumi-san and Sachiko-sama as it stood now.

“By the way, what business did you have here today, Minako-sama?”



Lacking anything else to try, Yoshino started by changing the topic of conversation.

“Prior to our conversation, you came here to spy on... Or, rather... Spectate on Shimako-san and my onee-sama’s dates, right?”

It was difficult to choose the right words. Because she was acting just like a peeping tom.

“Well, yeah.”

Minako-sama agreed vaguely. It seems like it was a small slip of the tongue.

“And so? Which of them were you able to see?”

“It’s unfortunate, but so far neither.”

“I wonder if they even came here to begin with.”

“On that matter, I have self-confidence.”

Ohh, you’re very trusting in your intuition. – Yoshino thought to herself. Even though her intuition was correct in this case, it would still be a Herculean task to find those two groups of girls unaided in this mall crowded with young people.

“I pray for your success. However, unlike searching for the cards in your treasure hunt it will be much harder for you because they move around.”

On the verge of leaving, Yoshino put all the sarcasm she could muster into her line.

“Yoshino-san too. You’ll be lucky to meet up with the stray Yumi-san and Sachiko-sama.”

Whether or not Minako-sama intended it when she made her reply, a thorn that was stuck deep within Yoshino’s chest seemed to loosen.

Part 3.

Now that Valentine's Day had passed the shops had already changed to match the mood of the next event, the Doll's Festival.

"Err, is this route really okay?"

As she looked at her note, Yumi asked for confirmation. What was written was the previously discussed and agreed upon course for their date.

"Of course?"

Sachiko-sama agreed, looking slightly doubtful.

"You said you sometimes come to K station to do some shopping, didn't you Yumi? I don't really know this area, so I want to see some of the places that you usually visit."

So.

First off was window shopping.

This activity was a mismatch for the daughter of the Ogasawara family. Although it may have been fitting if they were in Ginza. Like taking a stroll through the Ginza shopping district. Although that phrase seemed like something from her grandfather's time.

"Is there anything you would like to change?"

"Let's see. I'd prefer not to go to the department store."

So, with that, they left the station building, and entered into the fashion building that rose up in front of their eyes.

"Ah, onee-sama. Shall we take the elevator to the top floor and gradually make our way down. It was written in a Feng Shui book that that way was better."

"...You have such strange concerns."

Sachiko-sama grumbled, but let Yumi have her way. For Yumi, it wasn't really a huge concern. However, having no real preference either way, it was better to follow what she had heard would make a better mood. Similarly, she was wearing a sweater in today's lucky color so that she could happen upon some good fortune. Incidentally, she didn't have anything in lavender so it was pink, which was close.

They had to wait about a minute before finally getting on the elevator. It was Sunday after all, so the crowding was to be expected.

“Which floor would you like?”

Situated closest to the control buttons, Sachiko-sama asked the shoppers who were crowded inside and pressed the buttons for them. It may have been the natural thing to do, but Yumi watched her onee-sama’s actions proudly. Well, she wasn’t dealing with her first pushy salesman, but she handled it very smoothly. From time to time she could shout hysterically, or get on her high horse but in spite of this Sachiko-sama was wonderful. Stylish in everything she does.

(Hey, guy near the buttons on the other side with the facial piercings, follow Sachiko-sama’s example. Stop trying to clear your nose without a handkerchief)

Because of the overcrowding, she was pressed into Sachiko-sama’s back, although that slight good fortune didn’t last long.

At the first floor the elevator stopped at Yumi and the others near the door temporarily got out so that those further in the elevator could also leave. But since this was the ladies fashion floor Yumi decided they should get off here without riding the elevator to the top.

“We’re not going higher up?”

Sachiko-sama inquired.

“Above here is men’s fashion.”

“Is that so?”

Although the idea of window shopping was that you didn’t buy anything, there was no need for two women to visit the men’s section, right? Unless Sachiko-sama was intending to look for presents for someone, or something similar. For some reason, she looked a bit let down.

Who, I wonder, who? – Soon enough, a face she didn’t want to remember popped into her mind. Him. Gradually the pieces seemed to fit together, but before that she stopped thinking about it.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing. If you want to have a look at it, shall we go to the highest level?”

Yumi sounded her out, indirectly. So I’m this jealous type of person, am I? Yumi thought.

“Ahh, no, I was just thinking about my father’s birthday present. But the stores in this building are mainly targeting young people, so some other opportunity will come up.”

“Ah, Sachiko-sama’s father.”

With that said, Yumi turned towards the ascending escalator when Sachiko-sama grabbed her wrist.

“You can’t. If you do that, all the effort you went to with the Feng Shui will – “

“...Ehh?”

“Huh?”

Perhaps as a result of entrusting her with the lead, Sachiko-sama had been completely contaminated with Yumi’s way of thinking.

Part 4.

“Hmmm”

Folding her arms and muttering to herself in front of the movie theater was Takeshima Tsutako.

“They have to get by with only 3,000 yen for the date, and they’re using it to see a movie?”

That the pair which had entered the movie theater weren’t going to see movie was unimaginable. It had been about three minutes since Hasekura Rei-sama and her half-day partner for today, Miss Tanuma Chisato, had bought tickets at the counter and disappeared inside the movie theater. A look at what was printed on the gargantuan session listing confirmed her suspicion that they were going to see a sickly-sweet adolescent love story.

“Buying two tickets with a student discount won’t leave them any change.”

There’s no way they’d go without lunch, right? As she thought that, her own stomach rumbled. She checked the running time of the movie. It went for over two hours, so she could get something to eat now. She didn’t plan on joining them in watching a movie she had no interest in, instead she might be able to find Shimako-san and Shizuka-sama during that time, if she got lucky.

“Hamburgers are safe, but...”

For some reason, she wasn’t in the mood for one.

“I want to eat rice.”

And not something like curry, or a pilaf either, it tasted best when eaten in something simple and Japanese, like onigiri rice balls, or norimaki rice rolls.

This was because she had eaten a western breakfast of a muffin, potato salad and cup soup before coming. No matter what, she wanted a Japanese lunch. A western lunch would be wrong.

“I guess I could buy a boxed lunch on the first floor, and eat it at a park.”

Entering a Japanese restaurant and dining alone probably has too high a degree-of-difficulty for a girl in her first year of high school. Reluctantly Tsutako came to this decision, simply because her bank balance was lonely, and bid farewell.

The food stores were all crowded together in a narrow alley, so she forced her way through the crowd to arrive in front of her goal, the boxed lunch store. She ordered two different types of onigiri rice balls, kelp and plum. She planned to acquire some side dishes at a different store that specialized in that. Sautéed thistle root, or boiled fish and vegetables, or perhaps sliced and dried radish strips would be good.

While waiting to pay at the register, her gaze was idly drifting around the various stores when it passed across a face at a shop no more than 10 metres in front of her.

“Shimako-san!?”

Tsutako handed over a 1,000 yen note and received her change then hurried off in pursuit, but Shimako-san had already disappeared from sight. There were so many people here that, having lost her in the crowd, finding her again would be quite difficult.

But now she was wondering if that actually had been Shimako-san. Tsutako was starting to doubt herself because, when she saw her, she didn't have Kanina Shizuka-sama by her side.

“Oh well. I guess I'll finish my shopping.”

Following her plan, Tsutako ordered 100 grams of sautéed thistle root and, because it looked so tasty, 100 grams of boiled kelp and soybeans. She thought it was a bit too much for one person to eat, but being a cameraman was a test of strength so she should be fine.

This time as she was paying with coins, she again saw a face she recognized out of the corner of her eye.

“Shizuka-sama!?”

Tsutako saw her standing in front of a shop diagonally opposite the one she was currently in. So the distance wasn't a problem, but if she didn't turn around she wouldn't pass by Tsutako's current location.

It was like *déjà vu*. A bad premonition coming to pass. Just as she thought, when she finally made it out of the store, Shizuka-sama had disappeared.

But there was no doubting that it had been Shizuka-sama. That they had both been on this floor was the final proof.

“But why were they on the same floor, yet acting independently?”

The store that Shizuka-sama had been in was a delicatessen that a high class hotel had set up in the station building.

Part 5.

“I’m planning an ambush. Do you have any objections?”

Tsutako was looking straight at Minako-sama, who spat out her words somewhat sullenly.

“I object.”

“But you’re not going to elaborate further?”

“Ahh, yeah. Although I appreciate all the effort you’ve gone to so far.”

Despite the cold, they were underneath the enormous “K-station” sign at the station’s north exit. In other words they were standing outside the station, shivering.

A matching set of young women, they were. – Without a guardian, looking to cause mayhem. Well, Tsutako was looking to cause unsupervised mayhem – but her parter was Minako-sama so she should exercise some discretion.

“Gokigenyou”

– And so, toning down her behavior, first came the greeting. Actually, this was the first time today she had met Minako-sama.

“Yes, gokigenyou.”

But, despite the words, Minako-sama didn’t seem to be in good spirits. Well, standing around in the cold for so long while watching the people passing by would put her in a bad mood too.

“Earlier I met Shimazu Yoshino, and she’d hit upon something.”

“Yoshino-san? What did she say?”

“It’ll be difficult because I’m looking for something that moves around, she said.”

“Hah.”

“So if I don’t move, sooner or later I’ll see Rei-san or Shimako-san as they go past here.”

“...”

For argument's sake, even if you did assume that the targets did come to the north exit, Tsutako thought it would only happen when the date was almost over. It was the front of the station.

There were certainly a lot of people around, but they were all heading towards the station, or the station building, or the building next door. You'd have a higher chance finding them miles away from the station before the date was about to begin, she thought.

Firstly, even if they used this station, there were exits open in all four directions so if they didn't come this way it was all over.

It's a long shot. – In her mind, Tsutako let out a sigh.

What's the matter with you, Minako-sama. If you keep up like this, you won't get to see Rei-sama or Shimako-san.

“Umm, why don't we take a break somewhere.”

She offered, hoisting her plastic shopping bag.

“If you'd like, I've brought some things we could eat.”

Somebody had to make a move, otherwise she'd be here forever.

“A break?”

Minako-sama abruptly asked, with an ‘in a situation like this?’ look on her face.

“If you're not free to take a break, so to speak, I don't mind if we call it a strategy meeting.”

“Strategy meeting?”

This time it was a suspicious look that seemed to say ‘what's your angle?’ Probably because she was used to bossing around first years.

“You'll treat me to a nice, warm, canned tea, Minako-sama. And then we'll call it even. Come, come.”

Pulling her by the hand, they entered the station building. As long as they were out of the wind, anywhere was fine. She was only this frozen because she'd met up with Minako-sama.

“Wait, Tsutako-san. I'm still – “

Tsutako whispered into Minako-sama's ear something that silenced her grumbling.

“It’s okay. I have a better idea.”

If they had looked back over their shoulder they would have seen the outline of a familiar bus departing amidst the wintry scenery.

Part 6.

“Can you tell me just what you are thinking?”

Shimako finally blurted out. Until now she had refrained from asking this, time and again.

“What am I thinking, you say. Well, I’m alive. So I think all sorts of things. That’s all.”

With her face still pointed towards the window, Shizuka-sama gave a thin smile. Whether intentionally or subconsciously, she didn’t turn to face Shimako.

– is what Shimako was thinking when she suddenly turned to her and said.

“More importantly, is there a kitchen knife in the Rose Mansion?”

“Huh?”

“A kitchen knife. Or a regular knife would probably do.”

As she said this, she held up the box from the cake store. It had a whole, but incredibly small, cheesecake inside it.

“Ahh, yes, we do. A kitchen knife, and knives and forks.”

And with that, it looked like Shizuka-sama really was planning on taking her to their school. She knew that if they stayed on this bus they would eventually arrive at the ‘Lillian’s Girls Academy’ bus stop, but why would Shizuka-sama take her to school on their date? Shimako didn’t have a clue.

The two of them were jolted along in the bus.

The bus departed from the north entrance of K station and looped past Lillian’s Girls Academy. For lunch time on a Sunday, it was surprisingly empty. Originally intended for student’s use, the route only ran for half of the time on weekdays. In contrast, the government operated bus that went to her house was incredibly crowded.

“But we couldn’t really get a lot with our 3,000 yen.”

At their feet the plastic bags containing the food they had bought from the station building’s food court were scattered around. A slice of spinach quiche, 100 grams of noodle salad, 100 grams of marinated mushrooms, things like that. The smallest amount possible of a wide variety of things.

But Shizuka-sama didn't seem to be satisfied with what they had bought.

"If we weren't going to school, we could have had lunch somewhere else..."

Soup, salad, a main dish... With desert and a coffee, they could have done that within the 1,500 yen.

"That's putting the cart before the horse."

"Huh?"

"We didn't leave K station because I wanted to come to school, I chose the school because I wanted to leave K station."

"...?"

"The peanut gallery's annoying, right? You can't have a leisurely conversation."

"Haa."

At first Shimako thought she was using the term 'peanut gallery' to refer to the overflowing crowds at the center, but as she listened further it seemed that this wasn't the case.

"It took about 3 minutes for the bus to arrive, right? During that time, the newspaper club's Minako-san and the photography club's... Umm..."

"Tsutako-san?"

Thinking quicker, Shimako answered. When speaking of the photography club, the only person that came to mind was her classmate.

"Right, Tsutako-san. They were standing in front of the station."

"Those two were in front of the station?"

"I thought, 'I knew it.'"

Shizuka-sama seemed to smile triumphantly as she said this. But, unfortunately Shimako didn't understand what she was trying to say, or why she looked the way she did.

The bus stopped at a place that wasn't a bus stop. 50 metres ahead the light was green. And yet they weren't moving, I suppose it must be congestion.

The light went yellow, then red, then green again. Shimako spent the entire time thinking, but in the end couldn't compose just the right question.

"What did you mean by 'I knew it.'"

As the bus started to lurch slowly forwards, she boldly inquired.

"Huh?"

It seems Shizuka-sama had considered that conversation finished, as she didn't seem to understand the question at first.

"You said you saw Minako-sama and Tsutako-san standing in front of the station."

As Shimako explained, Shizuka-sama said 'ahh' and responded.

"Right, the newspaper club and the photography club were getting ready."

"Okay"

The bus stopped at a bus stop where three people got off and two more got on. The inside of the bus wasn't changing much but the scenery outside was changing noticeably with each stop. Slipping away from the hustle and bustle of the shopping district, they were going to an area of increasing greenery. Around here were a lot of temples, shrines, parks and, of course, schools. The shops were small, neighborhood stores and, despite being a residential area, there weren't many apartment complexes, which gave the area a tranquil atmosphere.

"If you think about why those two were at K station, you'll understand, right?"

Shizuka-sama clearly and slowly said this, as though trying to contain her excitement.

"Why they were at K station...?"

As she repeated Shizuka-sama's words, Shimako thought about it. Why those two were at K station, and why Shizuka-sama was acting as though she was avoiding them.

Before she could reach a conclusion, Shizuka-sama opened her mouth in irritation.

“...You aren’t suspicious of people? Or is this an act?”

“An act?”

Shimako didn’t immediately understand what she was talking about. She only felt that lurking somewhere within those words was a barb.

“The Tōdō Shimako that Yumi-san spoke about is different to my impression of you.”

“But I don’t know what Yumi-san has said – “

“That Shimako-san’s pretty, kind, smart, popular and so level headed that it’s hard to imagine she’s the same age.”

“That’s quite an overestimation”

“I think so too.”

The bus continued on smoothly. Bypassing stops where no-one was getting on or off, and not getting stuck at traffic lights.

“But I think I’ve understood something. You yourself are the source of most of that overestimation.”

“What do you mean?”

“What I mean is what I said. You’ve gone to great effort to build this image of Tōdō Shimako.”

“...”

“Disagree?”

“...I won’t respond to that.”

“That’s the honor student’s response, yeah.”

“Pardon me.”

“It’s okay. I’ll stop.”

Shizuka-sama shrugged her shoulders and smiled.

“I’m sorry, I said too much... I thought I’d be able to draw you out with this sort of conversation.”

“Hmm”

Shimako herself didn't know whether she didn't respond because she didn't know how to accurately express herself in words, or because she lacked the energy and conviction to refute it.

It seemed strange to her that it hadn't come as more of a shock.

It's just that, until now, no-one had managed to fully comprehend her heart.

For the wild and free Shimako, alone in her heart, the existence of someone who had the power to reach into and intervene in someone else's domain was much more surprising.

What should I do, if this is that person?

Huddling inside her heart, she wondered if the rapidly approaching person was coming to rescue her.

Looking outside at the tree lined avenue, she was thinking. Before she knew it, the bus was passing through familiar scenery. It had linked up with the route she took everyday from M station.

Suddenly, Shimako hit upon something and asked.

"Perhaps Minako-sama and Tsutako-san were pursuing us for a story about our date. Is that what you meant?"

"Yes, that was more or less what I was expecting."

Was Shizuka-sama's response.

Their conversation resumed, as though nothing had happened.

"So K station was risky, then."

"Right. So meeting at K station was also a bit of a thrill."

"...Ahh, that's why it was the west exit."

Shizuka-sama's designated meeting point was the station building's westernmost exit, which was also the one furthest from the ticket gate. It was a meeting place that people coming by train wouldn't usually choose. Until then, she had supposed it was chosen simply because it was close to the food court.

"You were just thinking, 'in that case, we should have met at school,' weren't you, Shimako-san?"

"Huh? How did you know that?"

She'd been spot on. But then she suddenly remembered her friend's face. The oft-teased Yumi would also get agitated like this.

"You made the same face earlier. If you're watching closely, you can understand."

Appearing satisfied, Shizuka-sama smiled.

"Earlier?"

The bus slid past a shrine.

"When you were talking lunch, and so on. But, again, this time I threw you off balance. Cart before the horse, yeah?"

"Why?"

"Well, we have to have a date right? I wanted to spend time shopping, riding the bus, and all the rest with you."

Shizuka-sama pressed the push-button. By the time she had gently stood up, they were almost at Lillian's Girls Academy.

Main

Part 1.

“Onee-sama, is this really okay?”

Yumi asked, tugging on the sleeve of Sachiko-sama’s coat as they lined up inside the store.

“Is what ‘really okay’?”

“Your seventeen year run of protecting yourself will be broken today.”

“How grandiose. Please don’t complain about each and every item that’s in the plan.”

“But...”

When Yumi agreed to this, she had no idea that it was going to be Sachiko-sama’s first time.

“It’ll be fine. If you teach me how to behave, I’ll be fine. If I get confused, I’ll just follow what you do.”

“Mmm”

What kind of conversation was this, Yumi asked herself as they chatted. ‘How to behave’, ‘follow what you do’, she said. To do something as simple and easy as buy a hamburger.

That’s right.

The two of them were currently in a fast food store.

The amazing thing was that today was Sachiko-sama’s first time in a fast food store.

She was a natural-born princess, and if you left it at that it was understandable, but as a high-school student living in Tokyo it was quite the rare existence.

Her inexperience with fast food may have been due to her family’s policy, or fastidiousness. In that case she should phone home and get permission before attempting this challenge. Yumi, who did not understand the lifestyles of the rich, was reading far too much into this – Sachiko-sama had eaten hamburgers cooked by her family’s chef, so it wasn’t an absolute rule.

“What is it?”

“Nothing”

If the ‘way of a lady’ still exists in this age, Sachiko-sama shouldn’t stray from the path. However, if she brought this up, she knew that Sachiko-sama would look displeased, so she didn’t dare say anything.

While this was going on, the line of people waiting to place their orders was steadily advancing. Before they knew it, Sachiko-sama was next in line.

“You’ve got it, yeah? Two hamburgers, two oolong teas and a medium serve of fries.”

Yumi handed over the envelope containing their funds, which Sachiko-sama received with some irritation.

“I got it the first time you said it. And even if they recommend something, we don’t add anything to the order, right?”

“That’s right. Unplanned expenses would affect our future plans.”

“Yes, yes.”

Their usual roles had been reversed. It was uncomfortable, but also a little bit fun.

Sachiko-sama didn’t hesitate over the chicken nuggets or the apple pie, placing the order impeccably. Similarly for paying the money. However, she blundered right at the very end. She didn’t take the offered tray from the shop employee, instead turning and walking off towards the seats.

“Onee-sama...!”

Hurriedly grabbing the tray, she caught up to Sachiko-sama. While chasing her, Yumi was burning with shame. Following Sachiko-sama was a difficult job, she knew all too well.

“Huh? The staff don’t bring it for you?”

“...”

When Sachiko-sama asked again with a serious look on her face, Yumi realized she wasn’t joking.

“In this system the customers take the food they’ve ordered to their tables themselves, and then eat it.”

It was like she was with some foreigner who had never been to Japan before. No, these days there aren’t really any countries that don’t have fast food restaurants, so... An alien, perhaps?

“But you didn’t tell me that.”

Sachiko-sama said quietly, as they were sitting down at a booth.

“Hmm”

Even on learning that her onee-sama was an ‘alien’, Yumi’s common sense didn’t desert her.

“But you would have learned that from watching the person in front of you, right?”

“You were going on about this and that behind me, Yumi, so I didn’t have a chance to observe.”

“In the end, it’s always my fault, right?”

“You beg to differ?”

Sachiko-sama, the contrarian who hates to lose, smiled coolly after pinning her own blunder on her petite sœur. Her smiling face looked so happy that Yumi was prepared to let it slide.

Sachiko-sama did not fit well with failure. Yumi was much happier to see her proud, smiling face than to see her embarrassed and hanging her head in shame.

“The food’s getting cold. Let’s eat.”

Yet, despite saying this, Sachiko-sama didn’t pick up her hamburger. She had unwrapped the hamburger and was doing well, but then started looking for something on the tray.

She lifted up her hamburger, the fries, the oolong teas, and then finally flipped over the tray’s place mat.

Yumi watched Sachiko-sama for a while, wondering if she should say anything. But she was hungry, so she took a bite of her hamburger first.

“Umm, onee-sama?”

“Huh?”

Sachiko-sama looked up as she answered and then, in the next instant, looked at Yumi with a curious expression that seemed to indicate she had found what she was looking for – or, more accurately, she looked from Yumi’s mouth to Yumi’s hands, where she held the half unwrapped hamburger.

“...No way.”

The two of them spoke at the same time.

“Huh?”

Again, their responses both came in unison.

But Yumi knew that the revelation that accompanied the ‘no way’ was very different for the two of them.

“Onee-sama. You don’t use a knife and fork with hamburgers.”

“...I suppose not.”

Sachiko-sama smiled bitterly, then let out a grandiose sigh of resignation.

“My mistake. It seems I should have learned from sandwiches.”

“So, then, at your house...”

Instinctively Yumi leaned forward, absorbed in the question. When Sachiko-sama saw this, she immediately put on her ‘displeased’ look and spoke.

“I’m sorry, but at my house we eat sandwiches with knives and forks too.”

Sachiko-sama said that when she was in kindergarten, her classmates would laugh at her when she ate sandwiches with a knife and fork at lunchtime. Ever since then, whenever she ate sandwiches away from home she would always be mindful of eating them using her hands. She persevered with this, even though it was something that didn’t come naturally to her.

“It seems that, unfortunately, my house is a bit different from normal.”



Sachiko-sama seemed to turn serious. Perhaps reluctantly, she picked up the hamburger with her hands and took a bite.

“Kindergarten is when you start to become self-aware, right? Being teased, and trying to improve your way of life to avoid that.”

“Improve your way of life?”

“Changing what you have for lunch, not getting driven to school, watching the same cartoons on television as the rest of your classmates, that sort of thing... But, thinking about it now, it was impossible for a child in kindergarten to do all that. As proof of that, I would end up in bed with a fever as a result of overdoing it.”

“Ohh.”

After hearing such an incredible story, the only response Yumi could offer up was ‘Ohh.’

“Because of that, I don’t really have any good memories of back then.”

While talking, Sachiko-sama removed the pickles from her hamburger and placed them on top of a paper napkin. As usual, she was vehement about her tastes.

Nevertheless, Sachiko-sama has had to struggle ever since kindergarten. Incredible. Unbelievably incredible.

As for me, what did I think about when I was in kindergarten? – Yumi struggled valiantly to cast her mind back.

I was normal, living a care-free and pleasant life, I suppose. Playing games, painting and singing were all fun. Thinking about it now, it was a blessed time. The only invisible things she struggled against were from her own imagination. A peaceful life.

“I wonder what’s got into me. It’s strange, to be talking about the past like this.”

Sachiko-sama picked out a single fry and ate it elegantly. Directly, with her fingers. She wasn’t searching for a fork any longer.

“That’s not true at all. I want to hear more of your past, onee-sama.”

“Oh”

“...Ahh, not just about your past though.”

Sachiko-sama smiled at Yumi’s frantic follow-up.

“Well then, shall we talk about now. And then about the near future.”

Yumi felt a little bit nervous hearing Sachiko-sama’s words, though she didn’t know why.

Part 2.

“Umm, is this really okay?”

“What’s the matter, Yumi? For some time now, you’ve been saying things to dampen the mood.”

“But...”

When Sachiko-sama had said she wanted to talk about the near future, Yumi hadn’t expected they would talk about where to go next on the date. But there was a store Sachiko-sama wanted to visit so she asked Yumi to take her, and here they were.

“Again, this is the first time in your life you’ve been to a jeans store... Right? Onee-sama.”

Call her obstinate, but she confirmed this once more.

Although it was Sachiko-sama’s choice, she wondered if it was really okay to introduce the daughter of the Ogasawara family to such an uncouth store.

Despite the cold, the store’s entry was wide open and country music could be heard coming from inside.

The product range was spilling out onto the footpath. The red letters of “Sale” and “Bargain” were burned into the retinas.

“That’s right. The first time in my life.”

The comparison may not really be appropriate, but Sachiko-sama was like a greyhound waiting at the gate for the race to start, such was her impatience to go inside.

Yumi was desperately trying to stop this, and asked.

“So, you’re actually planning on buying something, and not just window shopping?”

“Of course? Didn’t you say that personal purchases were allowed?”

“Well, I did say that, but...”

Buying a dictionary was different to buying a pair of jeans, she thought. But explaining just how it was different was a bit difficult. In Sachiko-sama’s case, it was definitely different. Completely different.

“Won’t your father and mother be cross at you?”

“Oh, they’ll be okay. My grandfather will probably cry, though.”

“Then it’s not okay, right?”

If there was anything that would make a grandfather cry, it would be wearing jeans. But would something like this really bring Sachiko-sama’s grandfather to tears? – I guess it’s just a figure of speech.

“But it’ll be okay if I don’t wear them in front of him. Besides, letting grandfathers have a say in their grandchild’s wardrobe would be troublesome.”

“Troublesome, hey.”

“If it doesn’t happen now, it may not happen. For a while now I’ve wanted to try on a set of jeans.”

“Ahh”

A set of jeans, was what she said she wanted to try on. Just like Sachiko-sama to get the words wrong. Yumi thought she must be equating them to trousers, which would be a huge mistake.

Oh well. She had heard that jeans were originally work clothes for laborers, so they should have no relevance to the daughter of a wealthy family.

While Yumi was pondering if it was okay to stain such a lady with this association, Sachiko-sama had quickly entered the store.

“Yumi, stop mumbling to yourself and come and show me around.”

“O... Okay”

Yumi prepared herself for the worst. After the victory over the fast food shop, the jeans shop should be a piece of cake, right? But if Sachiko-sama started talking about a games arcade, she would firmly refuse. That was outside of her territory.

“It’s called a jeans store, but I see they also sell things like sweaters and cardigans.”

Sachiko-sama remarked somewhat excitedly as she slowly progressed into the store.

(This really is the first time in her life)

Although these days you have so-called specialty stores, it's rare to find a store that sells only one product. The fast food stores called "Burger –" and "– Chicken" also sell fries and drinks. CD stores have cassette tapes and video tapes, butchers have sauces. – Although this is getting a bit off track.

"It's nice that they don't interfere when you're shopping."

As Sachiko-sama was walking, she looked on approvingly as a customer freely searched the store for a particular product. Speaking of which, when they had been window shopping in the fashion building earlier, there were a lot of stores where the shop assistants would be pushing the products on them, telling them about the materials it was made from or urging them to try it on, so this probably seemed fresh by comparison. The clerks at the jean store weren't really following the customers around. Other than the one at the register, they were either diligently lining up the products on the display or helping fold up cuffs.

"How do you find the jeans you want out of all of these?"

Faced with so many different types, Sachiko-sama faltered. There was certainly no lack of quantity, the entire interior of the store was filled with shelves of jeans. While there were some colored jeans sprinkled amongst them, the majority were of similar color and fabric.

"...I'm losing confidence."

The clerks kept folding the clothes, more or less oblivious. But it was at times like this that you were grateful for the existence of a clerk that would call out to you.

Anxiously, Sachiko-sama surveyed her surroundings.

The inside of the store was lively. The light country music and the heavy sounds of the sewing machine, a young man and his family enjoying their Sunday afternoon shopping.

(This is bad)

Yumi had noticed that Sachiko-sama was coming down. She was relieved that Sachiko-sama's first visit to the fast food shop had taken place more or less without incident, but if her first time shopping in a jeans store didn't also go smoothly it would probably have huge repercussions for the rest of her life. Trauma, I think they call it. That would be a problem.

"Hang in there, onee-sama. I'm right here with you."

Yumi took both of Sachiko-sama's hands in her own and encouraged her. Your petite sœur is here to help you out in any way, she was saying.

"...Yumi"

"There are a lot here, but we can restrict it to only those that are your exact size. For a start, we only have to look at the ladies shelves."

Pulling her by the hand, Yumi led Sachiko-sama over to the corner with a drawing of a girl.

"This is the ladies section?"

"Yes. Now we've halved the number of items."

Hearing this, Sachiko-sama looked a bit relieved. Good. Earlier she was looking like someone who was suffering from motion sickness.

"Then you just have to choose the color and style you like, and buy the one in your size."

Sachiko-sama could probably afford to buy vintage jeans worth several hundreds of thousands of yen, but we'll ignore that. For now, it was important that she didn't get confused, if possible.

"The style I like...?"

"Umm. Like ones with flared legs, or tight ones, or straight ones. I'm simplifying it, but that kind of thing."

Additionally there were various other things, like the rise of the jeans, but she omitted them all. If you tell all these things to a beginner, their head would explode.

"Yours"

“Huh?”

“The ones you’re wearing now. That’s the shape I want.”

Yumi took off her coat to better display them, then asked Sachiko-sama.

“These?”

Stonewashed, straight jeans. A totally uninteresting, completely standard pair of jeans.

“Right. When I saw you in that outfit, I wanted a pair of jeans.”

“Huh- !?”

Unthinkingly she cried out. Because her beloved Sachiko-sama wanted to copy her. An astonishing bolt from the blue.

“Your voice is so loud.”

But the store was so noisy that nobody paid any attention.

“You’re much more stylish than me, so a pair of slim jeans would suit you better.”

She was grumbling, but it wasn’t ill-natured. Yumi had Sachiko-sama whisper her waist measurement into her ear, then went to the shelves with the straight jeans and returned with two pairs.

“The legs are a little bit long.”

Sachiko-sama said, holding them up against herself.

“Try them on, then you can get them cut to size. Or people fold them and wear them like that.”

“What do you do, Yumi?”

“Of course, I get mine cut to fit.”

“Then I’ll do that too.”

Sachiko-sama entered into one of the row of changing rooms in a good mood.

“When you’ve got them on, let me know.”

Yumi stood in front of the curtain. Planning to act as a guard, just in case. There were a lot of male customers, and the change rooms were self-service so there were no staff around. It would be a disaster if someone were to mistakenly walk in on her onee-sama as she was changing.

At the sound of rustling clothes, her heart beat a bit faster.

She's taking off her coat now. That's the scarf coming off. The way she was imagining it was like a perverted old man. You could probably blame that on Rosa Gigantea.

(For onee-sama, the legs will probably only be 'a little bit' long.)

In her case, the legs were always quite long. Or, rather, way too long. Whenever she got them cut to size, there was enough material to make a tissue case and a purse.

Their height was quite different, so she thought that their legs would also be different lengths. Her quick impression was that Sachiko-sama would have enough left to make a pencil case if you combined both legs.

(Even still)

It was quite unfair that Sachiko-sama's bust should be bigger than hers, but the waist smaller. What the heck were you doing there, God. – She was thinking these grievances when suddenly a voice called out from behind the curtain.

"Yumi? Are you there?"

"Ah, yes."

"Can you help me."

"Okay?"

She was wondering what Sachiko-sama wanted her help with when she said 'Excuse me,' opened the curtain a fraction and poked her head inside.

"Whoa"

The words came out reflexively.

Sachiko-sama looked at Yumi a tad awkwardly. As though she wanted to be angry at Yumi for saying 'whoa', but was unable to given the current circumstances.

"What should I do?"

Somehow Sachiko-sama had managed to put on the moderately long jeans without turning up the cuffs. But it still looked somewhat fashionable on her. The jeans were folded at her heel, and her toes could just be seen peeking out. It's a bit rude, but it was suggestive of a drain spout.

"Excuse me for a bit"

Formalities dealt with once more, this time Yumi slid her whole body inside. Of course, she took her shoes off before doing so.

"Forgive my inadequate explanation, onee-sama. You have to fold these."

As she said this, Yumi squatted down by Sachiko-sama's feet.

"Onee-sama, can you please stay standing and lift up your heel?"

"Ahh... Like this?"

Shaky.

"Ahh!"

Yumi hurriedly steadied Sachiko-sama as she swayed violently.

"Onee-sama, please put your hands on my shoulders, then lift your heels one at a time, okay?"

"...I see. I got it."

Soon, she felt a weight on both her shoulders. Despite the circumstances, she felt strangely happy. Right now, I'm supporting onee-sama's body, was how her thoughts went. And also, onee-sama trusts me enough to lean her weight against me.

"Okay, we'll start with the right foot."

Following Yumi's instructions, Sachiko-sama quietly raised her right heel. After hurriedly folding up the right cuff, she did the same thing for the left. When Sachiko-sama could put both feet on the ground, her balance would return and she wouldn't have to brace herself.

She supposed she had become accustomed to seeing her stockinged legs below her skirt, but Sachiko-sama's feet with only stockings covering them looked like an adult woman's. Looking at such pretty feet, she could somewhat understand the feelings of foot fetishists.

“How’s the length?”

She asked, making minute adjustments. Just like she was one of the store clerks.

“Seems okay”

“Please put your shoes on and have a look in the full-length mirror outside the change rooms. To see how they balance, that sort of thing.”

“...But, Yumi. Is it okay in pumps?”

“Ahh, I see. Onee-sama, what shoes were you planning on wearing with your jeans?”

“I’d like to wear shoes like yours, Yumi.”

Even though she said this, they weren’t fine goods you would normally lust after. They were plain, ordinary sneakers.

“...And your shoe size is?”

“The same as yours, Yumi. 23.”

Smiling sweetly.

“...Okay.”

And like that, she was partially coerced into lending Sachiko-sama her plain, ordinary (and a little bit dirty) sneakers. Although their shoe size was the same, Yumi in her socks couldn’t fit into Sachiko-sama’s high heel pumps. Because she couldn’t see the mirror from inside the change room, she was temporarily stuck with the tricky task of trying to walk with just her toes in the pumps.

“Here, Yumi, hold on to me.”

Sachiko-sama held out her hand to Yumi.

“Ah, okay.”

Their roles were now reversed. The mirror mercilessly reflected Yumi’s timid, awkward posture next to Sachiko-sama’s slender, cool, jeans-wearing figure.

“These are fine.”

Sachiko-sama made a snap decision, without trying the other pair on. They were simple, but they fit her extremely well. It was almost as if they had been made for her.

“Okay, I’ll put a clip here to hold the position then you can take them off.”

Yumi attached two of the large clips to the right leg of the jeans to prevent the fold from moving.

“Ahh, so this is what they meant by ‘clips holding it’.”

In the changing room there were instructions saying “Jeans taken up free of charge. Bring them to the register with clips holding it.”

“That’s right. If you take it to the store employee they’ll take them up for you.”

“Understood.”

Sachiko-sama entered the changing room and closed the curtain. As she was doing up the laces of her sneakers, Yumi was secretly relieved.

Somehow they’d been able to clear this hurdle too.

Afterwards, it would finally be time for tea. She would have a cake set at a café she had wanted to go to for a long time. That was the plan.

“Yumi”

Sachiko-sama’s familiar voice called from the other side of the curtain.

“Yeah”

“Before we go to the café, there’s another place that I’d like to visit. Is that okay?”

“Hmm”

She had a bad feeling about this. But she couldn’t say no. Since they’d made it this far, she would accompany Sachiko-sama anywhere.

“That’s okay..... So, where to?”

There was a chance it wouldn't match her premonition, so she asked just in case.

But, unfortunately, she had hit the nail on the head.

“Do they sell sneakers at regular shoe shops?”

She hadn't yet paid for her jeans but already Sachiko-sama's mind had warped to another location.

Part 3.

“...Damn it.”

Tsutako muttered as she stood in front of the cinema.

It was a debacle.

It was rare that she would make such a careless mistake.
What a blunder.

“The next session doesn’t start immediately after the previous session ends.”

“So it appears. I humbly apologize.”

“It’s okay. You’ve exceeded my expectations with what you’ve done.”

Minako-sama patted Tsutako on the shoulder as she consoled her.

Perhaps due to warming herself with canned green tea and filling her stomach, Minako-sama was feeling generous.

“You took some photos of Rei-san and Chisato-san before they went into the movie theater, right? That should be enough.”

“Hmm”

They had been having a leisurely lunch inside the train station building. So they just made it to the front of the cinema at the time she had memorized. But that time was for the beginning of the next session, so there weren’t any patrons exiting from the cinema.

The shock was worse than the time she took an out-of-focus photograph of Rosa Canina. Because this time there was no chance of recovery.

“At any rate, locating Shimako-san should be our top priority. If you really did see her in the food court, then it stands to reason that they would have eaten at a bench, like us.”

“Hmm. Stands to reason, I guess.”

Even as she responded in the affirmative, the image of Tōdō Shimako and Kanina Shizuka eating side-dishes together on a bench didn't really take hold in her imagination. Eating on a bench required you to put the food on your lap, which would lead to them hunching over to eat. But that image didn't fit those two at all. But, on the other hand, why not? That was exactly what Minako-sama and herself had done, shamefully hunching over to eat the sautéed thistle root. Throw-away wooden chopsticks would accompany that perfectly.

"And at the same time as we're doing that, we can also look for Sachiko-san's group."

"Huh, why do you think that...!"

She hadn't said anything herself. She supposed that Yumi-san and Sachiko-sama were currently enjoying their first date somewhere around here.

She had a sinking feeling. If the conversation looked like turning towards her, she would have to take care to redirect it. Otherwise all her effort so far would be in vain.

Minako-sama was done with the movie theater already, and turned and walked off towards the station. Consequently, Tsutako chased after her. There was no way they were going to use this ambush plan again, right? At least spare her from that.

"That's right. Together with Miss Shimazu Yoshino."

Minako-sama made this bizarre statement as they walked along beside each other.

"Huh? Together, you say?"

"Together, I said. With Sachiko-san's group. Hmm, I wonder if together is actually correct? When I met her, she had strayed by herself and was looking lonely."

"Sachiko-sama and Yumi-san... And Yoshino-san?"

"Right. Oh, wait, did I say Yumi-san's name?"

"Huh? Ahh, yeah, you said it just before, Minako-sama."

Danger, danger. She had to take care, otherwise she would leak the gossip about Yumi-san.

“Really? I wonder. Anyway, it’s not important. What do you think about that grouping?”

“Well...”

I want to hear more about this, she thought. How did Yoshino-san get mixed in with Yumi-san’s first date? When they had met at the ticket gate, she hadn’t heard a peep about Yoshino-san.

“Yumi-san and the others don’t have anything to do with the treasure hunt prize, so we should keep that quiet...”

“You’re being naive, Tsutako-san. A reporter must never turn away from a story. Everything you gather becomes material. If we can pin down Sachiko-san’s group that becomes insurance in case we can’t find Shimako-san.”

“Ohh, insurance.”

Even if they did find Shimako-san’s group, the collected material would probably all be used in a story. That was how Minako-sama worked.

“Eye-witness account of the Rosa Chinensis en bouton sisters day off!” sprung to mind.

Good grief, she shrugged her shoulders. She wasn’t a newspaper reporter but she was a photographer. If good material rolled her way, she wouldn’t hesitate to pick it up. No, she understood quite well.

A bus was stopped at the bus-stop in front of the station.

Tsutako idly thought ‘If I got on this, it would take me to school,’ as she was reading the destination display. Right now, a young woman was being sucked into the entrance.

(Hmm?)

Again, she got the feeling that it was a face that she knew. Unfortunately, it wasn’t either Shimako-san or Shizuka-sama.

(But, just now it was... No, it couldn’t be)

She had her commuter pass on her so she could get on the bus to confirm it, if she was so inclined. But if she did that and the bus left with her on board, she'd have to get off at the next stop and walk back.

“Tsutako-san? We're going.”

“Ahh, okay”

Minako-sama called out to her as she was lagging behind and, on that note, she forget about her plan. If it wasn't Shimako-san or Shizuka-sama and just someone she knew, there was no reason to chase after them.

“So which way are we going?”

When she caught up and asked her question, Minako-sama's eyes sparkled.

“We'll start by going over all the benches in the station building with a fine-tooth comb. How's that grab you?”

“...I'll accompany you.”

She was hanging on to this boat for the ride. Now that they were inside the station building, if she lost sight of Minako-sama she would become just another young woman shopping in the crowd. This way, she might be able to act as a chaperone.

Later, when she thought about it, she realized that this had also been a careless miss. If she had boarded that bus, she probably would have been able to meet Shimako-san.

Part 4.

What am I doing? – Yoshino sighed as she watched the cars flow past underfoot.

When she left Minako-sama she went to a café to avoid running into anyone else she knew.

After going to the trouble and expense of getting the bus to K station, it would be a waste to return home having bought only a single paperback novel.

So she had decided she should make the most of her time here on her cherished day off.

Unlike those who were having a cheap date with only 3,000 yen for the two of them, she would enjoy a luxurious experience.

The temperature was low and the wind was blowing, but the weather wasn't bad. The sun had come out.

Sitting in the café, next to a window and with the sun shining on her, she had read her recently purchased paperback and sipped her Royal Milk tea. Soon enough she started to get hungry, so she ordered the most expensive of the three set lunches from the store, which was 1,500 yen. This was something that Rei-chan and the others definitely wouldn't be able to do today. If they both ordered this, once you added sales tax, they would be over 3,000 yen.

But by 2 o'clock she had regrettably finished her novel. At which time Yoshino left the café. It was usually a good store but today, for some reason, the flavor seemed watered down. Maybe they had changed the head chef.

If she were to wander aimlessly around here there was a chance that she would again run into someone she knew. She hadn't liked the idea of being seen while she was on her own today. So she didn't want to go somewhere like a bookstore, or a CD shop, where people would come and go. On the other hand, she didn't feel like going back to a café, or watching a movie either.

So, what should she do?

Yoshino went to a local zoo that was a few minutes walk from the station. But as she watched the elephants alone, and watched the deer alone, and watched the rabbits alone she gradually became more and more depressed until finally she didn't feel like watching the monkeys alone and left to avoid overstaying her welcome. There were also carnival rides in the park, but going on one of those alone is just hollow. – Plus, on Sunday, there were an annoyingly large number of families about.

Should she return to the station, or should she take the main street south from the station and browse the small shops in that area? Yoshino was absentmindedly pondering this as she stood on the pedestrian bridge.

She wasn't aware of the rate at which time was passing.

Time continued to flow along around her, with the second hand of her analogue watch ticking along and the cars driving beneath her.

What was she doing in a place like this?

For whatever reason, she was out of sorts wherever she went.

She had wanted a paperback, but she didn't have to get it at K station.

She had been hungry, but she hadn't needed a 1,500 yen lunch.

She liked zoos, but she really hadn't liked being there alone.

(Who have I chatted with since I left home?)

A little bit with Minako-sama. And when she ordered and paid the bill at the café, and when she bought a ticket to enter the zoo.

(One student)

And after that, not a single word.

If Rei-chan were here now, her mood would be completely different. Yoshino felt a bit sad.

To live a bit more luxuriously, to stretch her legs a bit more than usual... She had done these things, but they had done nothing to fill the hole left by Rei-chan's absence.

If she was with Rei-chan, she would have been fine not going to K station. For lunch, she wouldn't have complained if they had toast and black tea at home. Even if it was just the two of them sitting at the table, not really talking to each other but doing their own thing, it would still have been an incredibly fulfilling way of passing the time.

(I'm an idiot)

Even if Rei-chan wasn't there, it would still be a decent way to pass the time. If she had done that, at the very least she wouldn't have this growing sense of futility.

(I'm going home)

The harvest she was bringing back from K Station was a single paperback, and she was fine with that. She took her hand off the bridge's railing and stood a little bit straighter. Just then, her eye was unintentionally drawn to a couple that were walking along the sidewalk of the main street.

(Rei-chan...!?)

They were quite a distance away, so at first she thought she was mistaken.

(No way)

She strained her eyes to see if it was actually Rei-chan. The couple, that at first glance looked like a man and woman, turned to walk down the street that ran underneath the footbridge. Because they were offset vertically, they wouldn't actually cross paths, but as they drew closer their figures grew larger and she was left in no doubt.

(...Watch out)

Yoshino squatted down. It wasn't due to shock, or dizziness. If she could see them, it meant that she was completely visible too. By squatting down, she could still keep an eye on everything by looking through the gap in the railing.

(Wh... What's going on!)

Suddenly, the very girly Tanuma Chisato clung to Rei-chan's arm like a spoiled brat. Furthermore, Rei-chan didn't shake her off. Not only that, but she smiled as though she was enjoying it.

(Get your hands off her!)

That's being way too familiar. There are limits to how impudent you can be.

(You're only someone who won a ticket for a half-day date in a treasure hunt!)

They probably wouldn't be able to hear her from this range, but it would be bad if they did. So she opened and closed her mouth, but didn't voice her abuse.

Really, Chisato-san wasn't in the wrong.

Yoshino understood this well enough, but even still, she couldn't let go of what had just happened. For now she was down and, literally, could not get back up.

Her spirit's decline had invited her body's decline.

(And Rei-chan too. What was she doing smiling so gently)

Yoshino kept heckling them like that in her mind. She kept this up for as long as she could see their shrinking figures continuing on their way towards the train station.

Her heckling turned to grumbling, and then nonsense unrelated to the original cause, and it was only when she had run out of insults that she finally started to feel better. She would have felt even better if she were to shout out loud, but she didn't want to go to that extent.

"Well then..."

She stood up and started walking.

It wasn't like her to be disheartened.

Who strikes first wins. Better to attack than defend. Always go, go, go.

That's who she was.

After all, she was 'Rei-chan's Yoshino.'

Part 5.

“It’s a shame you don’t have a microwave oven.”

Shizuka-sama remarked, putting down her fork.

“The quiche is okay, but the stewed tongue and mushroom dish is supposed to be piping hot.”

“There isn’t one in the Rose Mansion.”

At Shimako’s words, Shizuka-sama flopped down over the table, dejected.

“You should have said so, Shimako-san. If I had known, I wouldn’t have bought these.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t realize.”

They were alone in the Rose Mansion.

It was quiet.

Not just in the Rose Mansion. It was as though the high school had been closed down, and all the buildings were holding their breath, watching these unexpected visitors.

“Is this your first time coming to school on a Sunday?”

“Yeah”

“It’s my second time. The first time, I came to pick up some sheet music I had forgotten.”

“Oh, so that’s why you said that to the security guard?”

“Right. I knew how to get inside without arousing suspicion.”

Lillian’s Girls Academy was an all girls school, so it was protected by a tall wall and sturdy gates. Not only that, but there were numerous security guards constantly patrolling the grounds and one stationed in a guardhouse by each of the gates to prevent outsiders from trespassing. Because of this, the students could go about their studies feeling safe and secure.

But, things were a bit different on the weekend. All the gates were closed, except for the side entrance near the main gate. And there was only a single security guard, sitting in the guardhouse by the gate.

In short, even though they had made it here, spending time at school on Sunday was not exactly a dream come true. Of course, when clubs or committees met the standard procedures had to be followed.

“You say ‘I came to pick up something I left behind,’ and then show your school handbook. When he has confirmed your photo in the book, he’ll let you in even though you’re not in school uniform.”

Just like Shizuka-sama had said, the security guard cheerfully ushered them in. And so the two of them were here now, in the Rose Mansion.

“But, by and large, it’s still a tasty lunch, don’t you agree?”

“Yeah”

As proof of that, they ate all of the food they had brought except for the cake. The cooled stewed tongue was no exception.

“I now understand why you chose rice balls as the main dish, Shimako-san.”

“But I didn’t think about it that deeply.”

It was simply that she preferred Japanese food. When Shizuka-sama said to her, ‘I have to make a phone call, so can you get a main dish?’ she immediately thought of rice balls. Or, rather, she couldn’t think of anything other than that.

“A victory for the subconscious then. Things like pilaf and pasta are much better when they’re hot.”

“...Oh, I see. When you said main dish, you would have been happy with pilaf or pasta.”

“No, I wouldn’t have been happy. I was happy with rice balls.”

Shizuka-sama laughed as she held her stomach, and Shimako unexpectedly found herself laughing along with her.

The cake still remained, but the two of them were both full so they postponed eating it.

“We’re still okay for time, right?”

Shizuka-sama inquired, looking at her wrist watch.

“Yeah”

Shimako agreed as she stood up, and refilled both their cups with tea. The steam rising from the tea cups and the sunlight streaming through the window were both warm. There was no need for heating just yet.

“But I never would have thought of coming to school on a day off.”

Shimako said, as she returned to her chair that was facing Shizuka-sama.

“Really?”

“Yeah. I mean, is it really interesting to go to school when there’s no-one there?”

Hearing this, Shizuka-sama looked into the distance with a complicated expression that seemed both troubled and amused.

“Interesting, you say? Well, when you look at something from a different angle, it looks fresh. The usual school buildings, the usual hallways, classrooms – the atmosphere when the usual classmates, teachers and other students are not here... Or I might be seeing things. Perhaps I’m the one that has disappeared. Everyone else is carrying on their normal school life in some other place, no?”

“I’m the one that has disappeared”

Shimako whispered.

She sympathized with that feeling just a fraction. It wasn’t the sensation she got from being at school with no-one around, but she had often thought about what it would be like if she hadn’t come to this school, or if she were to vanish from here.

Previously she would think about it dispassionately, but lately she hadn’t thought about it much at all.

Shizuka-sama would be leaving Lillian’s soon. So perhaps the image was more real to her.

“You see the school simply as a container, Shimako-san.”

“Container?”

Being prompted, Shizuka-sama added 'It's not a bad thing,' then continued.

"The school is a container for people, I mean. Currently, you're interested in the people so the container doesn't matter to you."

"And you?"

"Me?"

"You don't seem uninterested in people, Shizuka-sama."

"Right. And recent events too."

As she sipped her tea, Shizuka-sama smiled broadly.

"For instance, I'm deeply interested in Yumi-san."

"Ahh, Yumi-san."

Shimako smiled broadly too. For some reason, whenever she thinks of that classmate it brings a smile to her face.

"In her interview with the 'Lillian Kwaraban', Sachiko-san said their first meeting was an unexpected chance, and similar things. But to me, it feels like their meeting was bound to happen. For Yumi-san, if Sachiko-san were to leave then it would be the same as bidding farewell to her school life itself. For Sachiko-san, how enriching her school life is would be completely different depending on whether Yumi-san was by her side or not."

"I see."

Whether consciously or subconsciously, Sachiko-sama fully appreciated Yumi-san's charm, and chose her to be her petite sœur. It was tempting to think of it as fate. But there were other such unimaginable meetings that occurred – Shimako thought. Like her and Rosa Gigantea.

"And also Shimako-san."

"Huh?"

"I'm also interested in you."

Shizuka-sama said, unexpectedly.

I'm also interested in you.

It was like a surprise attack that left her spellbound. It took a while for the meaning to slowly reach her.

“Because I’m Rosa Gigantea’s petite sœur?”

Shimako gave voice to the reason that came to mind. She could think of no other reason why Shizuka-sama would be interested in her.

“...Or, rather, what’s inside of you. The part that’s not your role or facade.”

“What’s inside me –”

“The impetus was the last day they accepted nominations for candidacy in the school council elections.”

The last day they accepted nominations for candidacy in the school council elections, those events of about a month ago.

“What was it that I did?”

At Shimako’s question, Shizuka-sama smiled wryly and said, “Oh, you’ve forgotten?”

“That you wouldn’t accept me. That you wouldn’t call anyone other than Rosa Gigantea your onee-sama. Those things.”

“Ahh –”

“Back then, that was your true intention, straight from your heart, right? That was a part of you that wasn’t in the image of Tōdō Shimako I had in my head, so I was frankly astonished. Because of that. Before you said this, I didn’t see you as anything other than Rosa Gigantea’s petite sœur. But suddenly I wanted to know about the person that is Tōdō Shimako.”

Shizuka-sama clasped her hands together on the table, and looked straight at Shimako-san. Shizuka-sama’s gaze was unique. Like a polished gem. It was cold enough to drop your body temperature. But it was beautiful in its purity.

“And so? How much have you learned?”

Shimako allowed the silence to continue for a short time, before she asked. It wasn’t her intention, but it did sound a bit sarcastic.

“I’m not a detective or a private investigator, so I don’t want to know about your family.”

“Is that so?”

“I only want to look into you. To gaze upon you. I’ll overlook everyone except you.”

It felt like Shizuka-sama had already seen right through her.

Even though she hadn’t told her anything.

Even though she hadn’t laid bare her heart.

“Because of that, I was able to find your hidden card.”

Shizuka-sama said, smiling tenderly.

“So I thought this would be a perfect opportunity, to be able to spend some time relaxing with you.”

Again, Shizuka-sama looked at her watch. She was talking about relaxing, but perhaps she had something planned after this.

“Shizuka-sama?”

“Ahh, sorry. Contrary to the plan, I think I have to hurry things along.”

“Contrary to the plan?”

“Exactly. Shimako-san, let’s clear this up quickly, shall we?”

As she said this, Shizuka-sama stood up.

“Huh?”

Shimako wasn’t really sure what Shizuka-sama had meant by her last remark. The containers from the delicatessen were disposable, and cleaning the cups they had been drinking from was no big deal.

Then Shizuka-sama said ‘Here,’ took a manila envelope from her handbag and placed the contents on the table. The sound of paper rustling could be heard.

“This – “

Shimako picked it up to have a look. It was loose leaf paper that had been bound together and, apart from the cover page, was filled with tightly-packed writing.

“My meddling classmates prepared itineraries for our date.”

“Oh”

“And this was the final candidate.”

On the cover were the words ‘School Version.’ Meeting place, what to buy, bus timetable – all of these and more were recorded in minute detail.

“Just like they’ve written, we came to school on a Sunday. If we followed what’s in there, it would be easy for me to hand in my report, right?”

“But, the report...”

The meeting location, the things they bought, they were all different. The bus timetable they had copied was also irrelevant, and what they had done while at school was somewhat different.

“Right. That’s why I said, contrary to the plan.”

“So you’ll make amendments?”

“I’d like to keep it to this. What do you think?”

“If you think you’ll be able to face your classmates after doing that.”

Shimako also stood up, and took the cups and cutlery over to the sink. While she was doing this, Shizuka-sama stuffed the report back in her purse and left the room with it, calling to Shimako to hurry up. Because she was wearing her coat, Shimako didn’t take the time to do the washing up.

Down the creaking staircase and out of the Rose Mansion. The sun was growing large in the west.

“First off, the committee notice board.”

When they entered into the school buildings from the courtyard, Shizuka-sama called out ‘let’s go’ and took off at a run.

“Huh!?”

“I said we’re in a hurry, didn’t I? You’ll be left behind.”

She laughed as she ran off. The distance between them grew larger.

“So unreasonable.”

Reluctantly, Shimako too started to run. Ordinarily, this was something she would never do. “Don’t run in the hallways” had been a standard rule since preschool.

There was no-one in the school.

There was no-one in the hallway.

The only person was the one running ahead of her.

The sound of their feet echoed around the building.

Like a chorus, like a canon. Up the stairs, along the corridor.

“You’re out of shape, Shimako-san.”

In front of the committee meeting board, on the wall in front of the lecture hall, Shizuka-sama laughed at Shimako’s ragged breathing when she finally arrived.

“We have different lung capacity, no?”

She thought that singers would have training to improve their nose and lungs. In contrast, the environmental care committee did neither speaking practice nor physical training.

“According to the report, we ‘chat about that place in both of our memories.’ But, looking at the board, I don’t feel any strong emotions.”

“Is that so?”

The board had this week’s news from the environmental care committee posted on it. For the treasure hunt, the white card had been affixed above this.

Back then she was deeply moved that somebody, anybody, had found her card.

The white card was her heart. She had to hide it. But she desperately wanted it to be found. She wanted to be understood.

So she was overjoyed. That it had been found and brought forward. That was what she had longed for.

“Where to next?”

“The music room. But I wonder...”

“Huh?”

“Anyway, let’s go find out.”

This time Shizuka-sama didn't run. The two of them walked side-by-side through the school building.

Shimako searched for something to say.

But she couldn't find anything appropriate to say, so she continued to walk in silence.

Shizuka-sama too was silent.

It wasn't an uncomfortable silence. As Shimako was starting to feel that the silence was natural and preferable, they arrived at the music room.

"Ahh, just as I thought."

Shizuka-sama muttered, as the handle of the soundproofed door made a clattering sound.

"It's locked?"

"Yeah. Oh well, I thought it might be... It's a pity. I was supposed to sing while you played the piano."

See here, Shizuka-sama said while pointing to the spot in the report. Apparently, they had decided that she could play the piano without bothering to ask her. She had never played the piano at school, so it was strange how they were able to know that she could.

"Shimako-san, can you play the piano?"

"Huh...? Yeah. I'm not very good though."

So it seems like Shizuka-sama hadn't been the one to start that rumor. But that didn't really matter either way.

"How about Ave Maria?"

"Huh...?"

"It's okay, I'm not asking you to make the sounds of a piano with your mouth."

Shizuka-sama smiled as she said this, and Shimako too had a wry smile as she agreed.

"If it's the Gounod version."

"The one that Sachiko-san played at the entrance ceremony held by the Yamayurikai... You like that?"

“Yeah”

She liked most versions of Ave Maria. Songs that praised the Virgin Mary were all beautiful and tender.

“At any rate, I’ll put on a show for you.”

Shizuka-sama took her by the hand and proceeded down the hallway. In the hallway there was a spot that opened up onto a courtyard, like a balcony. As you might expect, the view from the third floor was impressive.

“I’ll add my gratitude for today into it – “

Coming from Shizuka-sama’s lips, she heard Gounod’s Ave Maria. Resounding in the courtyard, her voice was exceedingly beautiful. Maria-sama’s essence was definitely in there.

Shimako didn’t notice the tears falling onto her cheeks.

Part 6.

Shizuka-sama said farewell, and started to leave.

Having just finished singing Ave Maria, she wasn't going to go back to the Rose Mansion. She had things to do, she said.

"Ahh, what about the cake?"

Shimako called out to Shizuka-sama, thinking it would bring her back.

"My gift to you."

Looking back quickly, Shizuka-sama smiled.

"Huh?"

"Or maybe your reward for cleaning up."

If Shizuka-sama continued on her way home, Shimako would have to return the room in the Rose Mansion to its original condition by herself. It was like some kind of punishment game, except the task wasn't taxing and the compensation was cheesecake.

"If there's too much, you could share it with someone."

"Haa."

Even if she took it home, she doubted whether her parents would eat it. So she was left wondering if she should refrigerate it, or eat it all herself. So, for Shimako, it was like a punishment game after all. If it had been Yumi-san or Yoshino-san, it would have been decided quite simply and there would be no problem.

"I don't know about you, but I had fun today. I wanted to tease you a bit, Shimako-san."

"Tease?"

"I acted unconcerned, but I held a bit of a grudge from when you rejected me."

Shimako had been asked to be Shizuka-sama's petite sœur after Rosa Gigantea graduated. That was probably the rejection she was speaking of.

"So I snapped at you and showed off – but I wasn't good enough to pull off a perfect villain."

“...I like you, Shizuka-sama.”

Words that take you by surprise are often close to the truth. Until now, she hadn't really considered whether or not she liked Shizuka-sama, but it was probably the case.

She liked Shizuka-sama.

As a human, she was likable.

“Thank-you. Me too.”

Shizuka-sama blessed Shimako with a smile that contained no hint of sarcasm, then walked up to her and took her hand.

Her warm hand. It felt comfortable, as though they had known each other for a long time.

It was strange, but that time when Shizuka-sama had visited the Rose Mansion she had adapted to the atmosphere as though she had always been there.

“It's ironic. If Rosa Gigantea didn't exist, we may have become sœurs... Although we both care deeply for Rosa Gigantea.”

“But Rosa Gigantea does exist.”

“Right, so we're both happy.”

Shizuka-sama let go of the hand she was holding.

“Later.”

“...Shizuka-sama.”

“Right, before I forget. I'm the type to hold a grudge, so there might still be some payback to come.”

“Scary.”

“Indeed. You should prepare yourself.”

Shizuka-sama turned and disappeared down the hallway. Shimako waited five minutes thinking she might come back, but that wasn't the case. It seems like the payback she spoke of wouldn't be happening today.

With her spirit uplifted and her body wearied, Shimako descended the staircase and headed towards the Rosa Mansion.

For some reason, her steps felt leaden. She had certainly been strung out and spun around by Shizuka-sama, but she didn't mind that. When they had been together, she had a spring in her step and things had been simple. Time had ceased to have any meaning as she was assaulted by various emotions.

Now, walking down the empty hallway, she remembered the words of Shizuka-sama.

Perhaps I'm the one that has disappeared.

She had a premonition of what it might be like if she had to leave here prior to graduation, like Shizuka-sama. Leaving behind your good friends, abandoning your studies mid-way through them and seemingly running away. The image of this overlapped with her present self walking alone through the school buildings perfectly.

It's better not to want something, if you're only going to lose it in the end.

It's better to be carefree, so as to be able to leave here at any time.

But, contrary to that sentiment, she had accepted Rosa Gigantea as her onee-sama and become good friends with Yumi-san and Yoshino-san.

After all, no man is an island. If some kind person offers you a hand, it's not weakness to take hold of it.

In her heart, Shimako cursed Shizuka-sama. Why did she desert her? Here, now, being alone was the hardest thing to endure on their date. Tidying up the Rose Mansion, running at full speed through the school, delving into the darkness within her heart, all of these were trivial compared to the loneliness of being left by herself in this place.

Shimako was afraid of the school.

Without the students, the school was definitely just a container.

She was afraid of losing the people she loved.

She was afraid of being alone.

Shimako started to run. She had to get out of here quickly.

She was going to go back to the Rose Mansion, get her belongings and go home. She could come to school early tomorrow and do the cleaning then. At any rate, she didn't want to spend a second longer than necessary before escaping this solitude.

From the school building to the courtyard, then from the courtyard she tumbled into the Rose Mansion. But still her feeling of loneliness hadn't disappeared. The Rose Mansion was the same as the school buildings. Or perhaps worse, since she was more attached to this place.

The staircase swayed wildly as she ascended. It was the first time she had climbed it so violently.

If she were to stop, it felt like the loneliness would catch up with her and she wouldn't be able to move again. She understood that she was only chasing after herself, but that did nothing to calm her.

Shimako opened that extremely familiar door.

And then.

"Ah, welcome back."

A voice she hadn't expected called out.

"...Huh?"

The shock was too great, and Shimako couldn't believe what she saw in front of her.

What was going on?

The room was warm, and there was someone elegantly sipping tea at the table.

"I saw your bag was here, so I thought you'd come back and decided to wait. Where did you go? Wait, why are you looking at me like that?"

For a dream or an illusion, it was quite real. If that person was here, they would probably be eating the whole cheesecake with a fork.

And that's what was happening.

"Onee-sama...?"

“Bingo! But why would you need to confirm it? You can see that just by looking at me, right? Or did you think it was a raccoon or fox in disguise?”

She wouldn't have minded if it was a lie or an illusion.

But this was the genuine Rosa Gigantea.

“Ahh – “

Shimako's body gave way, and she collapsed on the floor.

“Wh, What's wrong!?”

Startled, Rosa Gigantea hurried over to help but she had lost the will to stand up.

“Shimako?”

“Onee-sama... I was”

She clung to her and cried.

She couldn't hold back the words any longer and they came spilling out, in a loud voice as she called out frantically.

Hurting.

Lonely.

Scared.

Although still confused, Rosa Gigantea held her in her arms without saying a word. Now, what she needed most was to be held in those arms. Why are you here? Why are you crying? They didn't need words to ask each other these questions.

The room was warmed by Rosa Gigantea's presence in it.

She had left her loneliness on the other side of the door.

And Shimako finally found peace of mind in Rosa Gigantea's arms.



Part 7.

“Ah”

Yumi realized the person she had seen in the bookshop this morning was Yoshino-san when the exact same thing happened and she saw her reflection out of the corner of her eye.

The place was a street that was a short distance from the station. Despite the distance, there were quite a few people coming and going due to the stylish stores that dotted the area.

“Yoshino-san?”

She hadn’t really wanted to meet anyone she knew, but something about Yoshino-san made her call out to her.

“Ah, Yumi-san.”

When Yoshino-san turned around, Yumi was relieved to see that she looked more cheery than she had originally thought. Even allowing for the light of the setting sun, it had looked as though Yoshino-san’s face had a shadow over it.

“Yumi-san ahh, you’re on your date. Sachiko-sama, gokigenyou.”

“Gokigenyou, Yoshino-chan.”

“I’m glad to see you’re having fun, Yumi-san.”

Yoshino-san looked at the shopping bags that Sachiko-sama and Yumi were holding and smiled. Even so, she was probably thinking of Rei-sama, because she didn’t seem to be completely full of pep.

“Yoshino-san, are you by yourself? Were you buying something?”

Belatedly, Yumi realized her faux pas only after saying it. Why is it that she always says too much? She just has to say things that shouldn’t be said.

“Yeah. Well, I’ve finished my shopping but – “

It turned into an awkward pause.

“Yoshino-chan, if you’ve finished what you were doing, would you like to have tea with us? I think that’s what Yumi was trying to say.”

Nice save Sachiko-sama. In her mind, Yumi clasped her hands together in gratitude. Thanks to her, the cracks that were appearing in Yoshino-san's facade had been halted.

"Tea...?"

"Uh, right. I thought we would go to that café. You know, the one Miss Kawagoe mentioned in her interview with the 'Lillian Kawaraban.'"

That mention had probably led to a small boom of high school students visiting the store and ordering the cake set.

K station was relatively close to school, and it was quite good. What made it more tempting was that from the outside it didn't look like a café at all. The exterior looked like an old, wooden Western-style house, but when you open the door you enter into a café. There were no billboards advertising it, so everyone at school referred to it as 'that café'.

She wasn't allowed to visit cafés on the way home from school just yet, so Yumi hadn't been. When she decided that the date should be around K station, she thought she couldn't pass up the chance to go to that café.

"But, I'd just intrude, right?"

Yoshino-san glanced at the two of them and smiled. She was probably being considerate because she knew it was their first date.

"That's not true at all. The more, the merrier. Right, Yumi?"

"Ah, yeah."

Even as she gave a nod of approval, Yumi was conflicted. She wanted to help out a friend in need, but she was also somewhat suspicious that Sachiko-sama really would enjoy it more with three people rather than just the two of them.

Yoshino-san said, "In that case," and agreed, so it was decided that the three of them would go together to that café. Along the way, Yumi gave a summary of how they had spent the day so far. Window shopping, lunch at a fast food restaurant, buying a pair of jeans from the jeans shop, buying a pair of sneakers from the shoe shop, buying a dictionary from the book shop, buying some sheet music from the music shop – . Come to think of it, the only one doing any shopping was Sachiko-sama.

She didn't ask how Yoshino-san had spent her day. For some reason, she thought Yoshino-san probably didn't want to talk about it.

"Oh, right, Yumi. How much do we have left in the envelope right now?"

Yumi was left confused when Sachiko-sama suddenly asked her about the balance of their funds that she was taking care of.

"Umm, we haven't spent anything since lunch, so there should be enough left."

The café at the end was the main event, so she had made sure there would be enough left for cake sets for the two of them.

"Then, Yoshino-chan. I'm sorry, but can you please add half of the amount that's remaining into the envelope."

"Huh? Onee-sama?"

Yumi had absolutely no idea what she was planning on doing. But Yoshino-san got the better of the startled Yumi and agreed.

"I thank you for your consideration, and I'll accept your offer."

Yoshino-san took the money from her own purse and put it into the envelope that Yumi was holding.

"...?"

"Yumi-san, there's no way you thought Sachiko-sama was being greedy, right?"

"No, no way."

But she felt unworthy of being Sachiko-sama's petite sœur because she did actually think that, just a little.

Yoshino-san whispered to her.

"Paying separately would be lonely, right? Alternatively, if you shouted me I would feel even more like a third wheel. Since I'm joining up with your date, it's my responsibility to pay my share, right?"

So Sachiko-sama was being kind to her, she said. Yumi only realized this when Yoshino-san told her.

"I see..."

Incredible.

Just like her.

So cool.

And like that, Yumi was back to being happy.

“Onee-sama”

Yumi rushed over and clung to Sachiko-sama’s arm. She didn’t know why, but it was something she suddenly wanted to do.

“What is it?”

“I’m incredibly happy that I was able to spend today with you, onee-sama.”

It didn’t matter that Yoshino-san was beside them, or that somebody might see them. As long as Sachiko-sama was by her side, where she could see her, where she could hear her voice and where she could touch her with her hand like so. That was enough. That was all she could ask for.

“You’re heavy, you know.”

Despite saying this, Sachiko-sama didn’t try to disentangle herself. Softly, Yoshino-san cheered them on with a ‘Go go.’

Part 8.

‘Is it really here?’ Yumi wondered as she timidly opened the door and found out that ‘it’ was definitely ‘here.’

“Welcome”

A middle-aged lady wearing an apron over her kimono greeted Yumi’s party of three.

“Is it okay if you’re seated with other customers at the large table? Apart from that, the only available seats are at the counter.”

The lady looked over her shoulder. The unoccupied seats at the counter weren’t all in a row.

“The shared table will be fine.”

Seeing that the vast majority of the patrons were young women, Sachiko-sama chose the shared table. It probably wasn’t always the case, but it seemed the café was quite busy on a Sunday.

They were led to a large oval table where two women were already seated.

“Excuse me.”

They acknowledged the existing customers and sat down. – Simultaneously, the two over there and the three over here cried out in surprise.

“Sachiko-sama, Yumi-san, and Yoshino-san too! Ahh, such bad luck.”

Looking regretful, Tsutako-san posed her hands as though holding a camera and pressing the shutter button over and over again. Accompanying her was Minako-sama from the newspaper club.

“Yoshino-san, I’m glad to see you were able to meet up.”

Minako-sama’s words were rather cryptic.

“Much appreciated.”

Yoshino-san was cryptic in her reply also.

“Three cake sets.”

Not knowing what was going on, Yumi spoke to the woman that had come around to take their order. There were three types of cake to choose from, so the three of them would each have something different. An authentic cheesecake for Yoshino-san, a chestnut tart for Sachiko-sama and a chocolate chiffon cake for Yumi. They came with a type of tea that was selected to match the cake. Alternatively, you could choose what type of tea you wanted and have a cake that matched that.

“By the way, Tsutako-san, what happened to your camera today?”

Sachiko-sama asked, appearing curious. Not just Sachiko-sama, Yumi and probably Yoshino-san too were interested in hearing about that. – That for today of all days, Tsutako-san was without a camera.

(No, wait)

When they met this morning, she had a camera. She had it then, but not now. That’s why she said ‘such bad luck.’ Sachiko-sama and Yoshino-san had appeared and she had no camera to take a picture with.

“Scoop! What happened to Takeshima Tsutako?”

Yoshino-san said, poking fun at Minako-sama who was sitting right in front of her.

“It’s not that big a deal. Sorry to disappoint you.”

“What do you mean?”

“When we came in, I was asked by the staff not to take photos inside the café.”

So her camera was simply in her bag. Because Tsutako-san wanted to be ready to take a photo at any time, she usually carried her camera where it was easily spotted.

“Ahh, and the only photo I’ve wanted to take since entering the café and putting away my camera was a shot of the three of you.”

“How uncivilized.”

Sachiko-sama smiled as she sipped her black tea. Certainly, the click of a shutter and the strobe of a flash going off would be completely out of place in this café that was a slightly remodeled western style house. Tsutako-san should take some time to relax with both hands free every once in a while, although that was probably impossible. Looking closely, her right hand seemed to move on it's own, trying to find the shutter.

Even still, that evening's impromptu tea party was fun.

Minako-sama didn't take a single note to use for a newspaper story, Tsutako-san didn't take her camera out a single time and Yoshino-san didn't utter a single 'Rei-chan.'

Without their school uniform on, everything seemed fresh and the tea and cakes were delicious. Surprisingly, the conversation flowed too.

It was an indulgent time, that they wouldn't have been able to savor if they were at school.

It's times like these that make you glad to have girlfriends.

Yumi thought they had only been there for about an hour, but when she looked at the clock she saw that they had already spent over two hours in the café. Consequently, she went home in a bit of a rush and completely forgot to buy the sun-dried cod that her mother had asked for.

Dessert

Part 1.

“You’ve been crying a lot lately.”

Rosa Gigantea murmured.

“I’m sorry.”

Shimako separated herself from the arms she had been leaning against. She wondered how long she had been like that. It was already starting to get dark.

“If you like, I’ll stay with you until the morning.”

“That’s not...”

“It might do you some good. Shall we go someplace else?”

With great effort, she stood up and stretched. Perhaps thinking she had recovered, Rosa Gigantea did not lend her a hand. For that, Shimako was again grateful.

“...But, crying might be a good sign.”

Rosa Gigantea went back to cutting the cheesecake into pieces with her fork and eating it. The lights in the room weren’t turned on. Because it was the weekend, the guard probably wouldn’t patrol this area but it would still be bad if light were to leak out.

“It might be good for you to show some more of the weakness befitting your age, Shimako.”

“My weakness”

Shimako took a seat facing Rosa Gigantea. It felt like the first time in a long time that it had just been the two of them in the Rose Mansion. They were the type of sœurs that always kept some distance as they looked at each other.

After all, the two of them were mirrors. They could see themselves in each other.

“If you try to shoulder everything yourself, you’ll be crushed. Nobody is going to criticize you if you show some weakness. Or if they do, it just means they’re a worthless human being and you should cast them aside. That’s not the sort of thing friends do.”

“Yeah”

She understood Rosa Gigantea’s reasoning.

The people who loved her knew of the secrets hidden within her heart, so would not change their behavior towards her. So the only one worrying about it was herself. As long as she stayed calm it would be no big deal, and her world would probably open up further.

“But I can’t take the next step.”

“Spring will arrive very soon.”

As she said this, Rosa Gigantea stood up and took a clean fork from the cutlery drawer. She then skewered a piece of the cheesecake and offered it to Shimako.

“Things will change when Spring arrives, right?”

Shimako took the offered fork and ate from it. It was sweet and sour. A hint of salt was mixed in, from her recent tears.

“Yep. The cherry blossoms will bloom. You’ll meet new people.”

“I first met you in Spring, Rosa Gigantea.”

“Right. I first met you in Spring, Shimako.”

The two of them ate their way through the cheesecake, little by little.

“Shizuka-sama tricked me.”

“Shizuka? Oh yeah, what happened to Shizuka? I came here because she called me, you know.”

“Yeah”

Having washed the cutlery, Shimako smiled as she dried her hands on her handkerchief.

“Her forte is surprising people, don’t you think?”

“Yeah”

“A real criminal mastermind. But she’s also quite considerate.”

“Really?”

Rosa Gigantea shut off the space heater. As they hadn’t turned the lights on, it was now almost pitch black.

“So now I finally understand.”

The front gate may already be shut, in which case they would have to climb over the wall. But even that would be okay. Given the way things were going today, it seemed likely.

“What is it you understand?”

Rosa Gigantea asked her, waiting by the open door.

“The main reason for my date with Shizuka-sama.”

Shimako answered as she hurried over.

“The reason?”

“So there would be no acrimony between Shizuka-sama’s class and the boutons.”

“Acrimony, huh”

Rosa Gigantea gently closed the door and then spoke.

“...Aren’t you perhaps over-thinking this?”

Part 2.

“...”

Yoshino had come out of her room because her mother had told her that her friend was here, but when she saw who was standing there she was lost for words.

“Gokigenyou. Can we talk for a bit?”

Her frilly dress could be seen poking out from underneath her coat. Her wavy hair that appeared to have been styled with a curling iron was already wilting, no longer able to defy the passage of time.

In the entrance was her hated rival for Rei-chan’s love, Tanuma Chisato.

“...I guess. Although are we really friends?”

“What else could I do? It would look suspicious if I didn’t say we were friends, right.”

“Well, that’s true.”

Chisato-san’s position was actually ‘Rei-chan’s fan,’ but it would seem a bit odd if she said that when visiting Yoshino. Certainly, it was convenient for both Yoshino and her family that Chisato-san had called herself a friend from Lillian’s.

“Won’t you come in?”

Her mother had called out, asking ‘Why don’t you invite her inside?’ so, unpleasant though it was, Yoshino reluctantly asked her in.

“It’s okay.”

Chisato-san shook her head and said she’d be going home soon.

“So? Why did you come here? If you’re looking for Rei-chan’s house, it’s next door.”

“I know.”

“And what about Rei-chan? You didn’t come here together?”

“No. She’d still be riding her bike now.”

“Bike?”

Yoshino left Chisato-san in the entry and went outside. Rei-chan's usual bike was definitely missing from the Hasekura family's bike shed.

"What do you mean? Are you saying that Rei-chan rode her bike to K station today?"

She asked, returning to the entry. Chisato-san said 'Yeah' and nodded, looking slightly proud.

"Rei-sama was so incredibly kind. When we were planning the date, I said I wanted to see a movie. And she said 'Let's do that then.' And then she said 'But if we do that, we won't have any money left over for lunch or train fares, right? So we can each make a box lunch and eat them in the park.' Rei-sama's cooking was really good. She even ate my failed attempt without complaining."

"Uh huh. So what is it you want to say?"

"It's about Rei-sama's kindness. I was fine because I used my commuter pass to get to K station, but Rei-sama doesn't have a commuter pass, does she?"

"Well, yeah. Since we walk to school."

"So she rode her bike there, for my sake. Because the 3,000 yen had to include transportation. And we have to write a report, so the numbers have to match up."

That was pretty stingy of her, Yoshino thought. Because she wanted to see a movie, they had to bring their own lunch. Because she wanted to see a movie, Rei-chan couldn't catch the bus. While they were doing that, Yoshino had been eating her extravagant lunch and reading her book.

"Because it was dark, Rei-sama took me home."

"Huh?"

"She said that I didn't have to write it in the report. To say that we had split up at K station."

"...I don't understand what you're trying to say."

“She bought a ticket with her own money, and accompanied me to my home.”

Now it made sense.

Saying that they had split up at K station was camouflage, to hide the fact that the budget had been blown by Rei-chan spending several hundred yen of her own money in order to properly escort her date home. Just what you’d expect from Mr. Lillian. Impeccable, wouldn’t you say?

Yoshino understood Rei-chan’s immense popularity.

“She even went as far as buying a magazine at a convenience store in my neighborhood.”

“That’s typical of Rei-chan, being so serious. She’d even prepared an excuse about doing some personal shopping to go to the station closest to your house.”

“That’s what I’m talking about. Rei-sama’s kind, right?”

Yoshino knew about kindness. But in Rei-chan’s case, it went beyond kindness to stubbornness. Not just Mr. Lillian but Mr. Perfect.

“So? What is someone that was escorted home like a princess doing in a place like this?”

Unable to see the theme of the conversation even after all this time, Yoshino was getting irritated. Just having Chisato-san standing here in front of her wasn’t putting her in a good mood.

Yoshino couldn’t believe her ears when she heard Chisato-san’s response to her question.

“Me? I returned home for a few moments, then headed out again.”

“Ehh?”

Involuntarily she cried out. All of the effort Rei-chan had gone to by buying a train ticket and escorting Chisato-san home had just been casually tossed aside, hadn’t it?

But that wasn’t the only surprising part. What Chisato-san said next was even more amazing.

“I quietly followed Rei-sama and caught the same train to K station.”

“Huh? Then? No way... Did Rei-chan – “

“She didn’t know. I was in a different carriage, and she was reading her magazine. Then I caught a bus and came here ahead of her.”

“That’s pretty stupid, yeah?”

The words were out of her mouth before she knew it. The pussy-cat image she hid behind while at school was too restricting. They didn’t have time to mince words.

“I know it was stupid. I get it.”

Chisato-san shot back, angrily.

Well, that was probably true. There was no need for Yoshino to objectively point this out. Chisato-san would have been able to realize subjectively that her own behavior was quite odd. But if she hadn’t realized her strange behavior, it may have explained their confusing conversation.

“Once more, why?”

Yoshino asked, after she had calmed down. Chisato-san’s response to her question was curt.

“Because I had something I wanted to tell you.”

“Something you wanted to tell me?”

You’ve already said plenty, Yoshino thought. About how kind Rei-chan had been.

“The movie was fun. Rei-sama listened to my request and took me to see a romantic movie even though she probably wasn’t interested in it.”

“Well, that’s...”

That’s precisely her tastes, Yoshino thought. Chisato-san must have believed the incorrect information that had been printed in the Lillian Kawaraban, so she didn’t know Rei-chan’s preferences. There’s no doubt that Rei-chan would have happily watched the romantic movie.

“We also went window shopping. There was a cute antique doll but it was expensive so we only looked at it. And Rei-sama accompanied me everywhere we went.”

Chisato-san continued.

“We couldn’t go to the zoo or the amusement park because they have an entrance fee, but we walked around the lake in the public park. They had rowboats that some families and couples were using, but I was content just to watch. Because Rei-sama was by my side. When I would turn to look at her, her smiling face would be looking only at me.”

“So, what. You came all this way just to give me your report?”

“That’s right. Something wrong?”

Chisato-san grinned evilly. Her matter-of-fact attitude was grating.

“I came to brag to you. About how fun my half-day date was with Rei-sama. About how kind Rei-sama was. I...”

Chisato-san’s voice faltered at that point.

(Huh?)

The proud look on her face that had been so grating gradually contorted and then the tears tumbled down in large drops.

“...Hey, why are you crying?”

Yoshino was trying to understand, but Chisato-san just gave a small snuffle and cried. The half-day date was fun, right? Rei-chan was kind, right? So why was she crying and looking so miserable?

“Chisato-san...”

Yoshino gently put her hands on Chisato-san’s shoulders. Even if she was an annoying rival for Rei-chan’s affection, there’s a temporary truce when your opponent is crying.

Chisato-san slowly raised her downcast head.

“I saw you, Yoshino-san.”

“Huh?”

“On the pedestrian bridge, in front of the park.”

“Oh, really?”

She had failed, and been seen. Even worse, it was by the person she least wanted to be seen by.

“So I thought I’d make you jealous by clinging to Rei-sama’s arm.”

“Then you succeeded splendidly. I was so jealous I wanted to slap you.”

Yoshino was starting to get angry just remembering it.

“I hated you, Yoshino-san.”

“Oh, really.”

Yoshino hadn’t thought that Chisato-san liked her, so it didn’t come as a shock. Indeed, it would have been worse if Chisato-san had told her that she liked her.

“Before your surgery you had the image of a tragic heroine and Rei-sama was always by your side, helping you out. That was exactly how I interpreted it.”

“I wasn’t forcing her to do that, you know. Rei-chan enjoyed fussing over me.”

“That’s something else that I can’t stand.”

“What now?”

Even though Yoshino thought she was offering up a truce, Chisato-san showed no indication of letting up her attack. Yoshino was troubled. Not wanting to brag, but she didn’t really have a lot of patience.

“How you’re monopolizing gentle Rei-sama’s affection. After flaunting it during the Yellow Rose Revolution, you simply got back together with her.”

“Hold up”

“And how you call Rei-sama, ‘Rei-chan.’”

“Chisato-san. You’re – “

“I’ve always hated that, but, just for today, I didn’t think there would be anything for me to hate.”

Chisato-san paused momentarily, then continued in a barely audible voice.

“Rei-sama wasn’t aware of it, but she called me ‘Yoshino’ five times today.”

“Huh...?”

“No matter what we talked about, it wasn’t long before Yoshino-san popped up. ‘How Yoshino did this’ or ‘when I came here with Yoshino.’ So I was jealous of you. But I couldn’t say anything to Rei-sama. When I got home, my anger wouldn’t go away, so I...”

“ – Chisato-san.”

“I know it’s not fair to complain to you about it.”

Chisato-san started to sob uncontrollably.

She was hurting. It was only natural that she would be crying. It wasn’t just her anger that had driven her to do this.

Chisato-san was pitiable.

You couldn’t help but feel for her.

“I’m sorry.”

Yoshino embraced Chisato-san.

It was Rei-chan’s fault.

It was all Rei-chan’s fault.

“I’m sorry my older sister is so insensitive.”

In the cramped entry, the two of them embraced and continued to weep, until the end.

Like fools, until the end.

Like friends.

Until the end.

Part 3.

“Hello, is this the Ogasawara-san residence? My name is Fukuzawa Yumi and I am a student in the first year peach class in the high school section of Lillian’s Girls Academy. I apologize for calling so late in the evening, but may I please speak to Sachiko-sama?”

Yumi spoke in a whisper.

She was sitting on top of her bed, with her legs folded back underneath her. Her hand was clenched around the telephone handset.

“Is it strange to use ‘san’ with Ogasawara, but ‘sama’ with Sachiko? Then perhaps Ogasawara-sama? I’ll try it one more time. Hello –”

The phone was switched off. This was a dry run.

“Okay, that’s perfect.”

This was the fifth time she had practiced it, making amendments along the way. Finally it had taken shape. However.

“That’s what I’ll say if one of the household staff answers the phone. Next is what to say if Aunt Sayako answers the phone.”

“And then? Are you going to run through what to say if her father or grandfather answer the phone? Give it a rest.”

An unexpected voice called out from behind her and she spun around to see her younger brother standing at the door, his body jutting half-way into her room.

“...You scared me. What is it, Yūki. You can’t just come in here as you please.”

“I knocked first.”

It seems she had been so wrapped up in her practice that she hadn’t heard him.

“I thought I heard some Buddhist chanting coming from the room next door, and it gave me the creeps.”

“Buddhist chanting!?”

A Lillian’s student doing Buddhist chanting? You moron.

“If you keep rehearsing like this, it’ll be too late to make the call. It’s already after 9 o’clock. Don’t you think you should call soon? Take your chances with who answers the phone. Who knows, Sachiko-san herself might pick up.”

Yūki strolled into the room and shut the door as he was talking. It stopped the heat from escaping, so she didn’t mind.

“Sachiko-*sama*”

“Picky, picky. Correcting me over such a minor matter.”

For some strange reason, Yūki had good intuition so he had probably foreseen that Yumi would want to call Sachiko-sama to thank her for today, but would have trouble going through with it.

“If you like, I could call her.”

He deftly snatched the phone.

“Stop – right – there.”

Yumi grabbed it back, flustered.

At least spare her from that. Nothing could be more embarrassing than her younger brother phoning and saying ‘thank you for taking care of my sister.’ First of all, what would Sachiko-sama think?

You aren’t even able to make a single phone call yourself?

Just thinking about it made her want to run away. It would be better to not make the call and be a discourteous disgrace than that.

Come to think of it, she also had that option of leaving things as they were and not making the call.

“Ahh, you were just thinking about not calling her, weren’t you?”

Yūki whispered.

“How did you know?”

“It’s written all over your face.”

“Oooh.”

It was a shock to be told that by a relative. Although they had matching raccoon-like faces, Yumi could never guess what Yūki was thinking.

“So, if you don’t call her?”

“It’ll be okay, I think.”

“So either way is fine then.”

“Yep.”

“But didn’t you originally think you should call her?”

“I guess.”

“So all your practice was pointless then.”

“...”

“It’s just a thought, but Sachiko-san won’t be expecting you to be able to speak flawlessly when you call her. Even if you make a mess of it, there’s still value in receiving the call. Especially for her.”

“So you’re telling me to call her after all, aren’t you.”

“I’m not telling you.”

“You are.”

But what Yūki was saying was definitely correct. Despite being her younger brother, he was usually pretty reliable for this sort of thing.

Yumi wiped her sweaty palms on the bed cover then turned her attention back to the phone.

“Can you stay until I’ve dialed the number?”

She wanted Yūki to watch, to make sure she didn’t try and get out of it.

“Yeah, that’s fine.”

“But you have to leave the room while it’s ringing. It would be embarrassing if you heard our conversation.”

“Such complicated orders.”

Nonetheless, Yūki went on stand-by with his hand on the door knob.

Everything was ready.

Yūki gave the ‘go’ sign, and Yumi’s finger reached for the call button on the receiver.

And at the same time as this.

The muted sound of the phone ringing on the first floor was heard, followed a split-second later by the louder ringing of the handset in her hand.

“Aaah”

Her heart was pounding, and she instinctively let go of the receiver, but not before her finger had reached out and pressed the call button.

(Damn it)

Now she had no choice but to answer the phone. Yumi hurriedly retrieved the handset, put on her best telephone voice, and spoke.

“Ahh, hello. Fukuzawa residence.”

And then.

“I apologize for calling so late at night. My name is Ogasawara Sachiko and I am a second year student at Lillian’s Girls Academy –”

“Onee-sama!?”

“Ahh, I’m so glad that’s you, Yumi.”

There was no mistaking it. What she was hearing from the receiver was her beloved onee-sama’s voice.

“Just now, right this second, I was going to call you, onee-sama.”

“It seems so. I could tell because you answered on the first ring.”

Laughter was coming from Sachiko-sama’s side of the phone.

“Umm, thank you very much for today, onee-sama.”

Yumi was sitting with her legs tucked under her, facing the wall with her head bowed down. She knew she couldn’t be seen, but that type of behavior was ingrained in her.

She could sense that, behind her, Yūki had left the room. She was a bit annoyed by his snort of laughter, regardless of whether it was from relief or from shock.

“To tell you the truth, I was a bit nervous”

“About what?”

“About calling your house. I was wondering if I would be able to properly greet your mother or father if they answered the phone.”

“...”

What Yumi heard was so unexpected that she was doubting her ears. It was hard to believe that Sachiko-sama, who was always so majestic and fearless would be nervous about greeting her parents.

“Hello, Yumi? Are you there?”

“...Yeah. Umm, onee-sama, is that really true?”

“Of course it is. Apart from Yūki, I haven’t met any of your family. I don’t know what type of things you’ve been telling them about me.”

“What type of things? Naturally, I’ve been telling them that you’re a wonderful onee-sama.”

“Really? You haven’t been telling them that I’m a selfish and hysterical onee-sama?”

“...Just a little.”

“Hey”

They both burst into laughter simultaneously.

Despite the distance between their houses, they were able to laugh together. She could picture Sachiko-sama’s smiling face in her mind.

Telephones are fantastic.

They’re like a telepathy machine, she thought.

“I had fun today, Yumi. We should do this again.”

“Yes”

Yumi put all her effort into sending an ‘okay’ sign. The electro-magnetic wave flew from her handset to the base unit, and from there down a thin copper line to Sachiko-sama’s house. All to deliver her cheery voice.

“Well, I’ll see you tomorrow, Yumi.”

“Yeah. Good night.”

“Good night.”



Yumi pressed the button to hang up after Sachiko-sama had ended the call from her side.

“Ooooh.”

Yumi laid back against her bed.

Thump. Thump.

“Onee-sama called me.”

A couple of minutes later, she still hadn’t calmed down.

It was hard to explain, but it was a joy that she wasn’t even able to imagine a few minutes earlier. That a single telephone call could bring her so much happiness.

Yumi went to bed earlier than usual that night.

Today had been such a fun day, but tomorrow would probably be a wonderful day as well, she thought.

Good night.

See you tomorrow.

The sooner tomorrow comes, the better.

Because her beloved onee-sama was waiting for her tomorrow.

The Crimson Card

I let out a sigh for Valentines.

Alone, standing by the window.

I wonder what has become of the crimson card since then.
It's probably still buried in the dark soil. Or else it's resting gently
in the hands of its rightful owner.

If it's the former, then it would be better to reclaim it soon.

Or else let it stay forgotten, and let my past stay buried with it.

Since people's feelings are beyond their control.

The heart flutters, and the status-quo cannot be maintained.

Part 1.

That day.

“Mifuyu-san”

The austere voice called out to me.

It was lunch time, and I had been idly looking out the window and thinking about her when the person herself appeared before my very eyes and surprised me.

But the person in question didn't know this, and tilted her head slightly before quickly moving on to the matter at hand. As an important person she was always busy with work, and didn't have the free time to pay attention to her classmates' every minor concern.

“You and Tomoko-san are on duty today, aren't you?”

“Huh? Yeah”

“Can you go to the science preparation room right now? Earlier I was stopped in the hallway by Oomori-sensei and asked to tell the people on duty that there were printouts that needed to be collected for the fifth period class.”

“The science preparation room”

“Sorry, but I couldn't see Tomoko-san anywhere – “

“Ahhh...”

Today was Valentines Day, so my partner on duty, Tomoko-san, had gone to give her hand-made chocolates to her onee-sama. About now she would probably be at the intersection of the paths lined with ginkgo trees, in front of the statue of Maria-sama.

“Well, I'll head off by myself.”

If she had time to come over here and tell me this, she could have gone to the science preparation room herself. As I was thinking this, I raised myself from the window frame I had been leaning against when she stopped me by saying, “That's not it.”

“So should I help you? – Was how I was going to finish my sentence.”

(...)

With her request, those few words spoken out of kindness, came the full power of my imagination. So, to me, it wasn't just a simple favor she was offering.

We had arrived at this point unexpectedly. But since we've come this far.

Sachiko-san had probably only said that because it was too much for one person to handle by themselves. That was all it was.

"Mifuyu-san?"

With a single glance, you can tell that she is a perfect lady. Someone who will soon take up a position as representative of the high school division of this academy. That wasn't the only thing she had going for her – she also had her looks, attitude and popularity.

But I think even that only scratches the surface.

"No, it's fine. If it's only some printouts, I should be able to do it myself."

When I politely declined she said 'Really?' and then walked away, like I thought she would.

Really?

Then I'll leave it to you.

– Fairly abrupt.

By no means cold. But having said that, definitely not affectionate.

There's no warmth between her and I.

That's not only with me. She's like that with almost everyone. It's like shaking hands with someone wearing silk gloves, so to speak.

"Sachiko-san"

Despite refusing the favor she had offered, leaving things as is was difficult. So I turned towards her, with her long, black hair quickly swinging from side to side across her uniform covered back, and called out.

"What?"

Slowly, she turned around.

"Umm... Thank-you. And good luck with today."

“Yeah”

The corners of her mouth were raised fractionally as she answered. Was she smiling, or grimacing? I hadn't seen her smile often, so I couldn't tell.

I, Uzawa Mifuyu, entered Lillian's Girls Academy at the start of high school. It's now the third semester of my second year, so I've already spent a little over half of my high-school time on these grounds, under the protection of Maria-sama.

Entrance exams tend to be the standard way to show that you possess the appropriate level of scholarly ability, and that's the case for people who knock on the door to Lillian's Girls Academy with no prior connection to the school.

In my case, the conditions were somewhat different. Strictly speaking, I wasn't a newcomer to this school. I had previously taken the entrance exam for Lillian's Girls Academy once already, managed to pass somehow, and secured myself a position. Kindergarten may have been a long time ago, but I'm still proud of it.

Back then, my mother was dancing with delight that her child had been accepted. My mother's mother, ie. my grandmother, is an alumna of Lillian's and her dream had been that her daughter would also attend. Although my mother was born and raised in the suburbs of Chiba City, she didn't give up on the idea of entering into Lillian's Girls Academy. To this day my mother maintains that there was no question of whether or not she would be able to make the commute, although I doubt that the school would accept someone who faced a two and a half hour commute each way, even if they did meet the academic standards. It may be different for a university student, but my mother wanted to do this as a middle school student.

Anyway, back to the story. Having entered into kindergarten, I had enjoyed half a year of life at Lillian's when struck by unexpected bad fortune. My father was transferred and, reluctantly, we left Tokyo, so I had to step outside of the pristine greenhouse. My mother lamented the situation, and I too received a considerable shock. But, as a young child, I had no means of expressing this, so when my mother came to pick me up on my final day at kindergarten I simply said my usual farewells to my classmates, took her hand and left the premises without shedding any tears. I only heard about it afterwards, but back then my mother pleaded with my father, asking to remain in Tokyo even though it would mean living apart. But my father said, "If we don't go together, we'll have to get a divorce," so she tearfully accompanied him. My father was right. If their daughter's kindergarten was reason enough for them to live apart, then divorce was the only option. But I don't think my father was truly being serious. It was only to get my mother to open her eyes. Even to this day, both my parents are embarrassingly close.

Time passed, and I'd almost finished my third year of middle school when my father was recalled to his company's main office in Tokyo. Simultaneously, mine and my mother's dreams of me once more attending Lillian's Girls Academy started to grow.

As a private school, they could be flexible about various matters. As someone who had received a position at Lillian's in the past, I was able to take the same test as the Lillian's middle school students rather than the test for students from other schools. Because of this, I was able to make the grade and was accepted into the high school. The timing was fortuitous and it probably worked to my advantage that one of my relatives is an alumna of Lillian's.

My mother probably wanted her daughter to be accepted into the school she loved wholeheartedly, but for me it was different. I had a reason for wanting to return that was unrelated to the prestige of the school.

I wanted to meet that person once more.

Barring some kind of accident, that person would still be at this academy. Because of this belief, I had wanted to return here for elementary school and middle school. At long last, my wish would finally be granted for high school.

The day of the high school entrance ceremony.

I was trembling as I read the class list. Her name was written directly beneath my name.

Ogasawara Sachiko.

The single name, out of all my classmates in kindergarten, that I had not forgotten.

Part 2.

Sachiko-san's existence was just as conspicuous in kindergarten as it is now.

For starters, even the way she arrived at school was different.

In the morning, a black car would pull up at the western gate, near the kindergarten. A beautiful little girl wearing a kindergarten uniform would emerge from the back seat. It wasn't her father or an older brother in the driver's seat. Nor was there anyone else in the back seat.

"I'll take my leave now."

She would seem displeased while saying this, and step away from the car. She would walk from the gate to the kindergarten in silence, without looking back. Eventually, the car would drive off. At the faint sound of the tires on the bitumen, she would take a single glance back over her shoulder. She would then sweep her gaze from side to side, before she once more resumed walking. It was as though she was surveying a battlefield. – That was Sachiko-san.

I saw that scene played out time and time again as I commuted to kindergarten.

Perhaps going to kindergarten itself was painful for her. There were plenty of children who wouldn't go to their classroom, and instead cling to their mothers when they first arrived at kindergarten.

As for my blessed self, since my earliest days my mother had been planting only a good image of school, so I looked forward to entering into kindergarten and adapted to it quickly.

You could say that kindergarten is when you first take part in society. You spend long periods of time separated from your parents, and there's probably an equivalent amount of stress. On top of that, it gathers together various children of the same age that each have their own personality. Even if you're not shy or meek, it's an environment that's hard to adapt to initially.

I was interested in Sachiko-san.

At first my interest was, naturally enough, in her overly conspicuous appearance. You could say that it was her innate ability, and it certainly was, but there was something about it that seemed to defy that phrase.

Something that made her difficult to get close to.

We learned about her family situation later, but I doubt more than a handful of kids truly understood. Back then I thought being driven to school was simply a matter of distance, like whether you walked to school or caught the bus. – Sachiko-san's house actually was a fair distance from the bus route, so that thought wasn't completely wrong.

It would be too far even for flattery to say that Sachiko-san fit in at kindergarten. Children can sense when others are different to themselves. In the beginning there were a lot of classmates who treated her as a curiosity and would watch her from a safe distance. Because Sachiko-san was Sachiko-san, she was able to sense this and her face, that looked displeased at the best of times, would scrunch up even further as she actively ignored them.

Sachiko-san was silently fighting.

Even if the kindergarten wasn't a happy place for her, she wasn't the type of child to scream and cry that she wanted to go home. Despite being such a young child, she probably had her own sense of pride.

Whether it was painting or handicrafts, Sachiko-san never lost to anyone. Particularly impressive was the time we were shown some basic dance steps by the teacher during playtime. As we all awkwardly followed the teacher's directions, she alone was extraordinary.

It was like the difference between heaven and hell. She was a jewel in the dunghill.

As we writhed on the ground like a squirming caterpillar, she danced like a graceful butterfly.

It was so beautiful, it was as though an angel had descended from heaven.

“I heard she takes ballet lessons.”

Somebody muttered those words as some consolation, but it was just making excuses. Sachiko-san wasn't the only one in our class to take ballet lessons.

Then one day, because of a thoughtless remark from one of our classmates, she stopped coming to school by car.

It was a petty affront. Not something worth taking notice of.

Instead, she switched to catching the bus to school. She wasn't going to lose. Perhaps she had been thinking about it beforehand, but there's no doubt that the taunt had been the impetus to change. She would get driven, in the same black car, to the school bus stop closest to her house, and from there catch the bus the rest of the way to school. Because her house wasn't within walking distance of the bus stop, she had no choice but to get dropped off by car. But even then, she would get dropped off around the corner before the bus stop and walk the rest of the way.

My eyes were continuously drawn to the minutia of Sachiko-san's everyday life. But my happiness wouldn't last long. My father's transfer had been decided.

My father and mother spent several days discussing matters related to the transfer, such as relocating and so forth, and I spent that time at kindergarten in somewhat of a daze.

Very soon, I would no longer be able to see Sachiko-san.

My feelings back then were somewhat strange; the nuance wasn't so much that it would be painful to part with Sachiko-san, more that it was a shame that I wouldn't be able to watch her. Right. My wish wasn't to play or chat with Sachiko-san.

On that day, during recess, I made a mistake and had a spectacular fall from the swings. At that time, the fad was to jump off the swing as it was still moving. The teachers had forbidden us from doing this, but we didn't pay them any heed. We younger children were trying to imitate our older sisters, and when the teacher wasn't looking we would practice jumping off the swing when it was swinging low.

I had been absent-minded all day, and when my friends called me over I joined them in line until, eventually, my turn arrived and I sat down on the swing. I was good at jumping off the swing because I practiced often at the park in my neighborhood.

Swish, swish.

I thought of the wind.

Perhaps I too would soon be gone from this place, just like the wind. What would it be like after I had left? I couldn't picture it in my mind, so I couldn't see whether it would be lonely or not.

I seized upon the solitary figure of a little girl in my shifting field of vision.

Ogasawara Sachiko.

It was then that I realized. Me leaving here would be exactly the same as if everyone other than me left.

Sachiko-san noticed my gaze and suddenly turned to face me. Her eyes seized upon my body and her beautiful face quickly frowned in displeasure. When I realized that I was the cause of the disgust on her face, the shock I felt was like I had been shot in the heart with a pistol. The subsequent shock was that my hands, which I had thought were firmly gripping the chains, had come loose.

It was only for a fraction of a second, but I had become the wind, flying through space. The sky spun around and for a moment I thought things looked different to normal, before I crashed into the ground.

"Mifuyu-chan!"

The friends I had been playing on the swings with hurriedly gathered around, and then when they saw the blood that was slowly trickling from my kneecap they all stepped back.

Luckily, the ground around the swings was covered with sand, so it was soft. It seems that I had flipped over completely and taken the impact with the ground on my hands and knees, preventing it from turning into a tragedy. It was a spectacular crash, but the only place I was bleeding was from my skinned knee.

With time came the pain, and with the blood came the tears.

“I’m going to get the teacher.”

One of the braver girls ran off towards the school building, while the timid ones said ‘Me too,’ ‘Me too,’ and also ran off until no-one remained. I only learned the phrase ‘to scatter like baby spiders’ later on, but it applied here. The children who had been playing on the other pieces of playground equipment were too scared to get involved, so they maintained a distance of at least five metres from me.

Out of all these people, only one approached me. It was Sachiko-san.

“Are you okay?”

She chose the most pertinent question to start off with and, when I nodded vigorously while crying, she seemed relieved. Her next question was said in a shocked tone of voice.

“What on earth were you doing?”

Before my eyes, she produced a white handkerchief. I thought it was to wipe away my tears. Because it was of such a fine quality I hesitated to use the thin handkerchief as a gauze.

While I was still wondering what I should do, Sachiko-san squatted down beside me and applied the handkerchief to my knee without a moment’s pause.

“Ahh”



“Does it hurt? You’re being punished because you didn’t listen to the teacher’s orders.”

I belatedly understood the reason for the look of disgust that had appeared on Sachiko-san’s face before I fell from the swing. It wasn’t that she hated me, it was just that she was opposed to people breaking the rules.

The teacher appeared, pulled from inside the building by children, and Sachiko-san stood up.

“Ahh, your handkerchief...”

“You can keep it. I have another one.”

And with that overly blunt response, Sachiko-san took her leave. I wanted to chase after her, but my knee and my heart were hurting, and I didn’t dare call out to tell her to stop.

While the teacher was washing my knee and drying the abrasion with absorbent cotton soaked with an antiseptic solution, I held tight to the lightly blood-stained handkerchief. It was the first time that I had talked one-on-one with Sachiko-san, and also the first time that she had given me something.

From this, I concluded that the reason Sachiko-san was cut off from the rest of the class was because she was more mentally mature than everyone else. Because she was more adult than the rest of the girls her age, they couldn’t connect on the same level.

Before long, the day arrived when I had to leave Lillian’s Girls Academy. Having finished saying my goodbyes in the classroom, I called out to Sachiko-san as she waited in the garden for the school bus.

There were two routes that the bus took. In order to service these routes with a single bus, they ran at different times. The white route and the red route. Sachiko-san’s was the red route, which ran later. Incidentally, getting picked up by your parents was called the yellow route.

Calling out to Sachiko-san took strength that I didn't know I possessed until then, but I firmed my resolve thinking that returning her handkerchief was a just cause and that today was the last opportunity I had to do that.

My mother had washed and ironed it. She had even called my grandmother in Chiba City for advice on how to get rid of the bloodstains and, as reward for all her effort, no trace of the yellow stains from the dried blood remained.

"I said you could keep it, didn't I?"

As I held out the handkerchief, Sachiko-san looked at me with her usual disinterested expression.

"But my mother said I should return it."

Then I held out the small package that my mother had given me.

"What is it?"

"She told me it was chocolates."

"Chocolates?"

"She said it's to show our gratitude."

I was annoyed with myself that I could only express it as though I was acting as a proxy for my mother. But at the time, my young self was unable to convey what was in her heart, and I couldn't say, "I'm grateful to you."

"...I see."

After some thought, Sachiko-san accepted the handkerchief and the small package of chocolates.

"Convey my regards to your mother, Mifuyu-chan."

It was the first time that I heard Sachiko-san call me 'Mifuyu-chan.'

The school bus returned from the first route. Before Sachiko-san boarded the bus, she said 'See you later' to me.

See you later. I repeated it back to her.

See you later, Sachiko-chan.

I could see Sachiko-san smiling and waving through the bus window. Looking like that, she didn't appear any different to the rest of the five year olds.

See you later.

I waved back at her.

I kept facing towards the bus until my mother had completed the various formalities and came to collect me.

Even though Sachiko-san could no longer see me from where she was.

It wasn't goodbye.

Because of that, I thought that one day I would return here.

Part 3.

When I next met Sachiko-san, I had the strange impression that she was just like how I thought she would be, and also completely different to how I imagined her.

On the outside, she appeared just the same as in kindergarten. Although as she approached adulthood, her beauty seemed even more pronounced. Her personality didn't seem to have changed much either. She was still her usual anti-social self, not laughing along with the rest of the class, and her severity that easily kept everyone at bay was still there.

Given that, the cause of my surprise was entirely due to my own wrong assumptions.

While I was away, I had morphed my mental image of Sachiko-san into that of my ideal woman. I had expected that her sharp parts would soften, that her maturity would give birth to tenderness and that she would become a gentle and elegant lady like the Virgin Mary.

But people don't change that easily. Or maybe they do.

"Were we in the same class before?"

When I saw her in the classroom and called out to her, with a single sentence she shattered and blew away my ten years of imagination.

She didn't remember.

Of course, I didn't have the sort of physical appearance that you'd take one look at and never forget, and other than the swing incident I hadn't done anything to stand out during kindergarten. Nonetheless, I hadn't even considered that she would have forgotten me. I thought there must have been something that made my short, 140cm tall self stand out from the rest of the students.

At any rate, I had to start from scratch and once more build up a relationship with Sachiko-san. But because my initial attempt at a reunion was crushed, I found it hard to be proactive. Once more, it felt like there wasn't a single gap in her armor that would allow me to get close to her.

Pitifully, the only things I could say to her were formalities like ‘Gokigenyou,’ or ‘Please pass the printouts to the back.’

Before long, the seating order was changed and the number of words we exchanged dropped dramatically. Then Sachiko-san was chosen to be Rosa Chinensis en bouton’s petite sœur and she drifted further and further away.

We had come full circle.

I spent my time watching Sachiko-san.

The ties of our relationship from ten years ago weren’t strong enough to build a new relationship on top of.

It had been an illusion.

That the Sachiko-san that waved to me from the bus had felt a spark of friendship was probably my imagination. I had thought that if I hadn’t had to move away and had spent the next day with her, and then the next, that we would definitely have become good friends. But Sachiko-san probably didn’t see it that way.

While I chased after the grown-up version of the kindergartener Sachiko-san, the days passed by. Because of my inconspicuous presence I was able to get along well with most of my classmates. There were interesting lessons and boring lessons, but overall it was enjoyable.

I didn’t join any clubs, nor were there any older students I was particularly close with, so it was only natural that I didn’t find an onee-sama. But, I didn’t really want one either. My thoughts have never turned to the older students.

When we started the second semester in the new year, one of our classmates was no longer with us.

She didn’t say goodbye, but when the winter break was over her desk was no longer in the classroom.

People’s impression of her ranged from ‘a conspicuous presence’ to ‘someone with no presence whatsoever.’ I lent more to the latter and, because I hadn’t been too interested in her, only learnt that she had been close with Rosa Gigantea en bouton after she had transferred.

Before my very eyes, someone had disappeared.

In the beginning she would come up in conversation, but as we were swept along by our busy everyday life it wasn't long until she was completely forgotten.

This time I was standing on the side of those left behind and I felt that keenly.

Part 4.

Why didn't I accept Sachiko-san's offer back then when she asked if she could help me?

"Well, okay" – why couldn't I say such a simple phrase.

For two years now, we've studied together in the same classroom. How many chances have I had to get close to Sachiko-san?

The truth is, there must have been countless opportunities. Like today. But I couldn't make the most of them. I let those chances slip through my fingers.

I was afraid of getting close to Sachiko-san.

I kept thinking about that time she rejected me.

By treating her coolly, I imagined I could avoid a second such heartbreaking experience.

But during sleepless nights.

That was when I saw Sachiko-san.

Unannounced, those feelings would suddenly enter into my mind.

Occasionally, as I lay there, I would come to hate Sachiko-san. Of course, it was never because she had done something wrong. I knew it was just a sudden outburst of anger on my part, but I still got annoyed by what I saw as the unfairness of it all.

Unable to think about anything else, I would slip into self-loathing.

It was like that one year ago.

Last year on Valentines Day.

In my bag I had a neatly wrapped box of chocolates. They were exactly the same as those given to a dear friend eleven years ago, when returning her handkerchief.

I hadn't yet worked up the courage to hand them to her. I was hoping that these would act as a cue, and Sachiko-san would recall what happened so long ago.

I ran through this simulation over and over again in my head.

I tinkered with my daydream until it was just right, requiring minimal effort to reach a good end. Within my own tiny body I became a god.

There were many opportunities to hand over the chocolates. But I found it hard to spring into action. Being in the same class seemed like it would make it easier, but on the contrary it made it harder to decide when to act.

About 30 minutes into the lunch break, there was a sudden ruckus in the hallway that ran alongside the classroom. Because it was the middle of February, and still very cold, the doors at the front and rear were both closed.

One of my classmates was a bundle of curiosity and went out to have a look. She returned all excited and said:

“Sachiko-san, something huge is happening.”

The commotion was caused by the mass of students that had come to give chocolates to Sachiko-san.

“ __ ”

We were lost for words.

The girls who had come to give her chocolates were all lined up in single file, waiting by the door. It was unheard of for a first year to be bombarded with chocolates in this manner, but what was even more remarkable was that there were second and third year girls in the queue as well.

I was frankly shocked that I could be pigeon-holed with the rest of them. I had thought that I was being unique. That I was being audacious by giving chocolates to Sachiko-san.

But, thinking about it, I probably wasn't alone in idolizing Sachiko-san. Just as I was feeling good about it, and thinking about taking my place at the end of the queue.

“What's your business here?”

Sachiko-san said, after she had been urged by her classmates to go to the front of the waiting queue. The students lined up in the hall were standing motionless, not taking a single step inside the classroom as though there was an invisible barrier at the door.

“Umm, here.”

The student at the head of the queue held out a cute, crimson package. She was from the class next door.

“...”

A full ten seconds elapsed in silence before Sachiko-san asked, “What’s the meaning of this?”

Having presented her valentine with chocolates, any fool could guess what was happening. She probably had to muster all her courage just to come here, even now her face was blushing, and if Sachiko-san kept this up it looked like she would burst into tears at any moment. And because she was first in line, it probably meant she had been here since the start of the lunch break.

“It’s chocolates. Umm, today’s Valentines Day... You know.”

I’m sure she didn’t have to say that. Sachiko-san was already well aware. What Sachiko-san had been asking was, ‘Why are you giving these to me?’

The girl at the head of the queue whispered something else in response, to which Sachiko-san responded clearly:

“I’m sorry, but I cannot accept these.”

She had probably raised her voice so that it could be heard clearly all the way at the back of the line.

Her rationale for refusing was simple. “Because I have no reason to take them.”

Just like that, Sachiko-san turned down everyone’s chocolate. She was ruthlessly consistent; some classmates who hadn’t witnessed what happened were asked to pass on chocolates from other girls, but they were steadfastly refused and had to turn around and take them straight back to the original senders. Of the

items placed in her shoe box during breaks, those which had the name and class of the sender written clearly on them were returned directly. For those that did not, she taped a notice to her shoe box saying that the chocolates inside would be thrown out after three days and left them alone. As a result, on the morning of the third day there were no chocolates left inside.

While I thought she was pretty cool, I also felt she was being quite harsh.

As for me, when confronted by such dreadful behavior, my thoughts of giving her chocolates withered instantaneously.

Even now, exactly one year after it happened, I still think about it from time to time.

Maybe if I had joined that line and clearly conveyed a reason why she should take them, Sachiko-san would have accepted my chocolates.

On that final day at kindergarten, Sachiko-san had accepted the chocolates.

I desperately wanted a reason for her to gladly accept them. But finding one was far more difficult than I thought.

Part 5.

Which brings us to this year's Valentine's Day.

I was confident that the same scene from last year would repeat itself again this year. Actually, until I arrived at school it felt just like déjà-vu, as though I was tracing out exactly the same course as last year.

Three days earlier, I had gone to a department store to buy a small box of milk chocolates from a certain chocolate maker that my mother liked.

At this time of year, the shops are all packed.

Places that are crowded at the best of times put up special displays that contain tiny shops from chocolate makers that you've never heard of or don't usually visit. The crowding is especially bad in the evening, when office ladies and female students congregate, making you feel as though you're standing on a platform during rush hour. It's even worse around famous chocolate makers, where they have to resort to handing out numbered cards in order to deal with all the customers.

Ordinarily, if a traditional rice cracker maker were to come out with a chocolate coated rice cracker it would be enough to make you want to cry. The mismatch between that and the brand's traditions would be too great. But even they probably don't want to get left behind during this holiday season.

Partly as camouflage, I bought chocolates for my father and two others. I used the excuse that he might be working late to give my father his chocolates in the morning. Giving them to him after he had received a lot of obligatory gift chocolates from his subordinates at work would diminish their value. Overjoyed that the first chocolates he received were from his only daughter, my father offered to drop me off at school on his way to work. Taking advantage of his offer, I arrived at school at quite an early hour.

As I got out of the car in front of the school gates, I saw a black car had also pulled up slightly ahead of us. I supposed it was someone like me, a student at Lillian's that had been given a lift by a family member. The morning peak of students arriving at school was nowhere to be seen just yet, but it wasn't unheard of that someone would arrive at this early hour. Even so, it was somewhat out of the ordinary; usually you'd only get here at this hour if you had something like club practice or preparation for the school festival, or if you were carrying numerous or heavy bags.

As though the student had already been dropped off, the idling car pulled away from the curb. I thanked my father and got out of the car. Maybe it was because the roads were empty, but it took an hour less than usual. The train must take a considerable detour on the way from my house to school. Given that, it would have been better to stay in the small house we lived in when I was in kindergarten – although there's no point in saying that now.

As I jogged past the school gate I saw a figure ahead of me wearing a green dress with an ivory collar – as I had expected it was a student at Lillian's Girls Academy.

At that time I hadn't yet discovered that the figure was Sachiko-san. Although after seeing the car pull away, I probably did have a faint glimmer of expectation. They had probably traded in their cars numerous times during the intervening years, but the car I had just seen had a very similar air about it to the one that Sachiko-san had used so many years ago. I don't know of any student other than Ogasawara Sachiko-san that it would be fitting for such a car to deliver.

“Sa...”

I aborted my attempt to call out to her.

Because I was her classmate, I could have greeted her with “Gokigenyou” and then we could have walked to class together. No matter how much of a big shot she was, we still studied together in the same room. So it wasn't as though I couldn't call out to her.

I don't really understand why I did what I did myself.

Having missed my chance to call out to her I became like a stalker, keeping myself completely concealed as I followed after her.

Sachiko-san stopped in front of Maria-sama and prayed. After offering up a brief prayer she raised her head and set off walking again.

The fork in the path. If you take the path to the right, it will take you to the auditorium and chapel, and then on to the martial arts building and the pool. The left-hand path runs parallel to the library, and if you followed that you would see the high school buildings.

Usually, we took the left-hand path. If you did take the right-hand path, you could get to the school buildings by taking the correct path at the next fork in the road, but it was a fairly large detour. But for some reason, Sachiko-san took the right-hand path. Out of habit I stopped to offer up a perfunctory prayer to Maria-sama, then followed after her.

I wondered where she was going.

Because she doesn't belong to any clubs, I didn't think she was going somewhere because of a morning training session. At first I thought she might have been going to meet Rosa Foetida en bouton, Hasekura Rei-san, at the martial arts building, but they see each other every day and I couldn't think of a reason why she would need to see her before school started.

That was when I remembered about today's festivities. That is, the event organized by the newspaper club wherein we have to search for the treasure hidden by the Roses' en boutons.

I had wanted to laugh it off as being typical of Minako-san, but found that hard to do. In one of the stories involving Sachiko-san, they said that the winners would receive a present from the boutons. After the rumor that it was a ticket for a half-day date, my heart couldn't keep still.

I was surprised that Sachiko-san went along with the plan. After seeing her attitude last year, I expected she would absolutely refuse. To put it in Sachiko-san's words, "Why are you looking for treasure?" followed by "Why are we going on a date?" I guess it was about then that I came to my conclusion.

(A treasure hunt, huh)

It hit me like a flash of lightning. Sachiko-san was probably going to discuss the plans for today with Rei-san. That was also the reason why they had chosen a time that wouldn't draw attention to themselves. Rosa Gigantea en bouton, Tōdō Shimako-san would probably be there too. The three must have agreed to meet at the martial arts building.

But then Sachiko-san suddenly stopped.

She seemed to have stopped right in front of the old greenhouse. She was a bit off course if she was heading towards the martial arts building.

Sachiko-san surveyed her surroundings. I quickly hid behind a tree in case she looked my way.

My heart was thumping, wondering if I'd been discovered. But after swiveling her head back and forth as though she was watching out for something, Sachiko-san gave a sigh of relief by the door. It was okay. I still hadn't been seen.

At times like that I was thankful for my short stature. Also when I'm able to still fit into the cute clothes and shoes made by children's clothes makers.

Sachiko-san slipped into the greenhouse. Before opening the door, she gave her bag a tight squeeze.

The greenhouse.

Even though I was acting dangerously like a stalker, there was no way I had the audacity to walk into the greenhouse. If I got any closer than this, I'd be discovered.

The greenhouse was so old that the glass was broken in places, but the space inside it seemed to be isolated from the rest of the outside world. Taking even a single step inside was a conscious action. Were Sachiko-san to inquire as to the reason why I had come into the greenhouse, I would have no answer.

I stayed outside and quietly peeked in. Up ahead was the school's back gate, so even if Sachiko-san saw me I wouldn't look completely out of place. I hadn't even been able to confirm if Reisan and Shimako-san were also there.

After about ten minutes, Sachiko-san came out of the greenhouse. Alone, she looked around after exiting just like she did a short while ago but she didn't seem to notice me as I was on the opposite side of the greenhouse to the entrance.

After that, Sachiko-san walked off towards the school buildings, as though she was making her way to school from the back gate. Naturally, she didn't turn around to look back at the greenhouse even once.

I agonized over whether I should follow Sachiko-san or look inside the greenhouse before deciding on the latter. Sachiko-san was probably going to head straight to our classroom. And then prepare for another day at school like usual.

(In that case)

I wasn't able to contain my curiosity. What had Sachiko-san been doing inside there? Once I started thinking about it, I couldn't stop.

Someone might still be inside. Even still, they definitely wouldn't be Sachiko-san so it would probably be okay. At that moment, there was no one who was more frightening to me than Sachiko-san.

When I entered the greenhouse, the atmosphere changed.

There was no one else there.

The rays of the morning sun pouring through the glass had the same kind of solemnity as a stained glass window, but without the color.

I walked back and forth inside the greenhouse, searching for a clue. No matter what, I wanted to find out what Sachiko-san had been doing in here.

And then, that's when I found it. It had been about ten minutes since I first entered the greenhouse.

"This is – "

In the old greenhouse, the floorboards had been torn up and there was a flowerbed with plants growing out of the bare earth. In here, I saw something that looked slightly unusual. There were traces that a hole had been dug up and filled in next to the base of some shrub that I didn't know the name of.

It had been carefully filled in, but the surface of the ground was damp. It was as though it had just been completed this very minute. The smell of fresh soil hung in the air.

My heart was thumping with curiosity as I felt the area with my hand. As expected, the ground was soft.

I had a look around and spotted a gardening trowel sitting on top of one of the racks that held pots. Using this, I started to dig. There was no hesitation. Nor was there any sense of guilt. There was only desperation. All I wanted was to expose Sachiko-san's secret.

After digging down about ten centimeters, it felt as though the trowel was sliding against something and, in the end, a plastic bag appeared.

Inside it was the crimson card. From a single glance I could tell that this was the treasure for today's treasure hunt.

I brushed the dirt off it and, in a daze, put it in my bag. I wasn't composed enough to think about what you would call that sort of behavior. My judgment had regressed to that of a child's – I saw something I wanted and grabbed it without thinking.

I put the dirt back where it came from, and left the greenhouse as though I was fleeing.

With that, the crimson card would not be found. I would hold onto it until the end, and not hand it over to anyone.

My heart pounded with excitement.

Part 6.

The crimson card was like a joker.

It was entirely up to me how I used it to alter the outcome of today's treasure hunt.

Even so, I still didn't have any definite thoughts about how I should use the crimson card. I didn't have the nerve to innocently present a card that I hadn't legitimately found to the Rose Mansion.

But I did get a slight sense of superiority out of it.

Today, the only thing my classmates were talking about was the Valentine's Day treasure hunt.

Because Sachiko-san, who had to hide one of the treasures, was in the same class as us the conversation naturally turned that way. Everyone, regardless of whether they were participating in the event or not, voiced their opinion about where she had hidden her treasure. During the lunch break, amongst the crowd of students who came to give chocolates to someone in the class there were also some who came to watch Sachiko-san. They were probably planning on following her if she left to hide her card.

But Sachiko-san didn't move.

Perfectly understandable, considering she had already hidden her treasure. And it had already been unearthed.

During the lunch break, Sachiko-san was called to the hallway a number of times. There weren't as many as last year, but there were still students wanting to give her chocolates this year too. They were all first years who hadn't heard about her bad behavior last year. Ignorance is bliss.

Even so, Sachiko-san seemed to be much gentler in her rejection of the chocolates this year when compared to last year. Maybe she had matured, or maybe her anger was proportional to the number of chocolates.

Then again, when Sachiko-san accidentally stumbled upon a student who was trying to give the same chocolates that she had refused to Hasekura Rei-san, with only the name on the card changed, her temper flared. You can't help but think that people who first decide they want to give chocolates on Valentines Day, and then try to find someone to give those chocolates to, are putting the cart before the horse.

I watched the patterns of Valentines Day relationships with cool indifference.

But as the end of the school day approached, my indecision grew.

Little by little, I started to realize the magnitude of the crime I had committed.

The angel inside me said that even now, there was still time. That I could go to the greenhouse and bury the card.

The devil inside me whispered that it would be such a waste to let the card that I had worked so hard to get slip from my grasp.

Besides, if I returned the card, what would become of me?

Would I return to how I was this morning, before I got my hands on the card?

That wouldn't happen. – The answer was obvious.

Time can't be undone. My memories won't be completely erased.

(I won't reclaim my innocence by burying the card)

I thought that this was divine punishment.

By taking hold of the card, I had lost the ability to enjoy the treasure hunt.

I can continue to hold onto this card and not let anyone else near it, or I can return it to where it came from and withdraw from the treasure hunt. Those were the two paths that remained open to me.

Part 7.

Instead, I hesitated.

With the treasure hunt beginning, I still hadn't decided how to proceed.

At the time the game started, I quietly slipped in amongst the crowd of participants in the courtyard and took a registration form. On the reverse side of the registration form there was a map, with the greenhouse drawn inconspicuously in a corner.

Sachiko-san stood in the middle of the trio of boutons.

I glanced at her discreetly. But Sachiko-san didn't look at me at all.

Tsukiyama Minako-san from the newspaper club explained the rules, but I didn't take any notice of them. My mind was concentrating on the contents of the handbag that was hanging from my left hand. The crimson card in there continued to silently condemn me.

Right before the start, the bouton's sœurs were called to the front.

I scrutinized Sachiko-san's petite sœur, Fukuzawa Yumi.

I had always thought of her as an innocuous girl, with nothing special about her. No matter how hard I tried, I couldn't understand why Sachiko-san had chosen her as her petite sœur.

I had no doubt that there had to be something about her that made Sachiko-san choose her. This was something that I'd been thinking about since the day after the school festival.

Her grades were average, her appearance could be described as ordinary rather than beautiful, she was taller than me but if pressed you'd say she was short and there wasn't anything special about her build, being neither obese nor overly skinny.

In short, I still hadn't found an answer. My first impression of her as someone who was somewhat lacking in composure still hadn't changed.

With the bouton's sœurs given their five minute handicap, the treasure hunt started.

I made myself as inconspicuous as possible as I slipped away from the crowd and then headed to the old greenhouse. The greenhouse was empty, so apparently no one had noticed it drawn off to the side of the map. The martial arts building was in a similar position, but because it was the location of Rei-san's club activities I could see a stream of people rushing there through the cracked windows.

Returning to the same old spot, the ground that I had dug up and then filled in this morning was much drier, making it look far less obvious. If you didn't know about it beforehand, you wouldn't notice it.

I used the trowel to dig at that location. I was thinking that I should put the card back.

But in reality, I was still hesitating.

I was thinking that there was no way anybody would find it hidden in this place. And in that case, I might as well just hold on to it.

But would that really be okay, I wondered.

I didn't know.

Not knowing what I should do, I put back the soil I had dug up. The ground was blurred by my tears.

I wondered what I was doing in this place.

I wondered if this was supposed to be my revenge on Sachiko-san for not remembering me.

All I had wanted was for her to look back at me.

All I had wanted was for her to acknowledge my existence.

I didn't know what I should do.

I could no longer move.

I was imprisoned in this old greenhouse together with the crimson card.

Part 8.

“Ah”

That person burst into the greenhouse.

I turned around, surprised.

“Gokigenyou. I’m sorry, I seem to have startled you.”

“Not at all.”

The surprise wasn’t that someone had burst into the greenhouse. It was that the person was Fukuzawa Yumi. Why is she here? Having shut myself away in the dark recesses of my mind, for a moment I didn’t understand what was happening. But when I saw the map she was holding, it all came back to me.

“Yumi-san, are you here to look for the card?”

“Yeah. You too?”

She probably doesn’t know who I am. And she definitely doesn’t know that I already have Sachiko-san’s card.

Because of this, she’s able to smile so openly. Quite normally, like a happy little girl.

“I got here just before you came in, but do you really think it’s in here?”

I wanted to see if I could trick her into saying something.

I thought this was a place that nobody would search.

Since Yumi had taken so long to come here, it probably meant she hadn’t known about the greenhouse beforehand.

In that case, there was no need for me to be worried. If Sachiko-san had let it slip, then she was just as guilty as I was.

I felt strangely at ease. My own crime was unchanged. But if the people around me were sinners as well, I wouldn’t be alone in holding these feelings of guilt.

“Well – “

Yumi-san walked further into the greenhouse. What could she be thinking? Hurriedly she approached that spot where the ground had been dug up and refilled.

“I knew it.”

She called out as she arrived there.

The place where the floorboards had been torn up and a flowerbed was growing from the dirt.

“What is it, Yumi-san?”

I followed her over and asked.

“I think it’s probably here.”

Yumi-san suddenly plunged both of her hands into the soil and started digging a hole.

“Umm, Yumi-san.”

I called out to her numerous times, but she couldn’t hear me as she kept frantically digging. Eagerly, with her bare hands.

I thought she looked just like a dog. But I couldn’t smile at that. I knew that I could never dig so enthusiastically, no matter what the cause.

I had no doubt now that Yumi-san had figured out this location on her own. Her eyes were full of the pure thrill of the hunt. Completely different to me.

“If you want to, you can help out.”

Yumi-san offered, without resting her hands.

“If we find it, we can hand it in together.”

(Huh...?)

I couldn’t believe my ears.

I knew it was wasn’t going to happen, but suppose for argument’s sake that the card did appear – there’s no doubt that it would belong to Yumi-san. Why would she offer half of the credit to someone who just happened to be present? There are limits to how generous you can be.

Despite this, I kept the card she expected to find hidden. While I was contemplating whether or not I should return it, I had wrapped it up in the map and was holding it under my arm.

I held the trowel over Yumi-san's shoulder and offered it to her. It was breaking my heart to watch someone so gallant. The longer I allowed her to continue digging without finding anything, the dirtier I felt.

"But I don't think you're going to find it there."

I squeezed the words out.

"Huh?"

Instantly, Yumi-san blinked her eyes and opened her mouth, flabbergasted. Then she looked at me with an expression that said 'Why do you think that?'

"Because I was the one that dug up the ground and filled it back in."

"Huh!?"

I'd said too much, and now I had to explain myself to her.

"I'm sorry I took so long to tell you. Actually, I dug up the ground right here just before you arrived."

"No way..."

Yumi-san looked from the pile of dirt she had excavated, to the hole she had dug, and then to the trowel before letting out a sigh. It looked as though she had believed what I said.

Relieved, I inquired:

"Hey. Why did you think it was here, Yumi-san?"

"Why do you ask?"

"When you entered the greenhouse, you came straight here, right? So I thought you must have had some reason for doing that."

I had to know, no matter what. If she hadn't been told about it beforehand, what possible reason could she have for searching in this particular spot?

Other than Yumi-san, not a single person had come here.

"Ahh, that's because."

Yumi-san pointed at the small, leafy plant that was growing next to where the card had been buried and spoke.

“This rose is called Rosa Chinensis.”

The rose title that seemed like a part of Sachiko-san.

“...I see.”

I’d lost. Completely and utterly.

Today was the first time that I’d been inside this greenhouse. This was the first I’d heard that Rosa Chinensis was growing in the school.

At any rate, there was no way I would have been able to find the card by myself.

“Then, why were you digging here?”

Unexpectedly, it was Yumi-san that had caught me out with a pointed question.

“That’s because... The color of the dirt was slightly different, so I thought there might be something there.”

“Really!?”

Upon hearing that, Yumi-san once more took up the trowel and started to dig. Confident that the card was buried here somewhere, she was going to dig an even deeper hole.

I thought I had no choice left but to tell her the truth. If it hadn’t been for me, Yumi-san would have definitely been the rightful winner of the game and owner of the crimson card.

But I didn’t have the courage.

With her back to me, I thought to offer her the card many times, but in the end I couldn’t go through with it.

Why did it have to come to this, with me lacking the strength of will to be honest with her.

It was only after she’d dug down about 20cm that Yumi-san finally gave up.

Looking at my watch, it was just after 4:35pm. No matter how you looked at it, it was already too late. The rule was that you had to bring the card to the Rose Mansion within the time limit to be recognized as the winner.

Instead of confessing my sins I helped Yumi-san fill in the hole.

From there we washed our hands at the tap inside the greenhouse and stepped out of the greenhouse together.

The announcement that the game had finished was being broadcast, but I couldn't go to the courtyard with Yumi-san.

“Yumi-san, please go on ahead of me.”

Until now I had only been vaguely aware of the students searching around outside, but they started to appear in dribs and drabs as they walked towards the school buildings.

“Well, I'll take my leave then.”

“Gokigenyou.”

As I watched Yumi-san walk away, I undid the ribbon in my hair. I understood, just a little bit.

Yumi-san had something that I didn't.

And Sachiko-san definitely had an eye for people.

Part 9.

In the end, I went back into the greenhouse and buried the card in its original location.

Later, I heard from one of my friends in Fuji class about Kanina Shizuka-san's fleeting desire to get closer to Rosa Gigantea. How Shizuka-san had run in the student council election just because she wanted Rosa Gigantea to look at her.

Like her, I too wanted to attract the attention of someone who was unaware of my existence.

In order to avoid being hurt, I've always kept myself in a position of safety, only watching on. But by doing that, my feelings aren't communicated.

I've always loved Sachiko-san.

So even if I'm rejected, it's okay.

Even being cut down would be a step up.

Instead of hiding her card, or being angry about things long forgotten, I would have been better off talking to her every so often so that she would remember me.

But there still might be time.

Even the crimson card was peacefully reclaimed.

So I've decided to try a bit harder.

I'll call out to her from time to time, and when she offers to lend a hand I'll politely accept.

Little by little, doing these everyday things.

Now that Valentine's Day is over, the high school buildings are filled with conversations about the bouton's dates.

"Ahh, onee-sama."

As our class was returning from the home economics classroom, we were approached from the opposite direction by Yumi-san.

"Umm, it's about this Sunday."

"Sunday? Ah, just a minute... I'm terribly sorry, but could you go ahead without me?"

Because the latter part was addressed to us, I asked Sachiko-san if I should look after her sewing box.

“Will that be okay?”

“Of course. I’ll leave it on your desk.”

As we slowly passed by, Yumi-san bowed to us.

She had a somewhat strange look on her face, but we kept walking.

“They suit each other well, those sœurs.”

I was smiling as we walked away.

“Huh?”

One of my classmates asked.

“It’s nothing.”

I shook my head.

As expected, Yumi-san didn’t recognize me with my new haircut.

Rosa Chinensis' Best Day of Her Life

Part 1.

“...This sucks.”

Mizuno Yōko, the Rosa Chinensis, muttered to herself aboard the bus.

Luckily, the bus wasn't very crowded. There was no one within 1.5m to take umbrage at her self-pitying soliloquy.

It was already evening. The time to be going home from school.

The bus that was going from the train station towards Lillian's Girls Academy obviously wouldn't have as many people on it. Over half the seats were empty.

“– Oww.”

Instinctively she winced as the pain swept through her abdomen like a wave.

(No matter how you look at it, it's completely unreasonable that only women have to suffer this kind of pain)

Her body was in a very sorry state. Because it was that time of the month.

(Oh, I give up)

It wasn't that she didn't usually suffer period pain, it was just that this month was exceptionally bad. Not only had it arrived five days earlier than expected, it was heavier than usual too. There had been no signs of it last night, but unbelievably it had shown up this morning. Consequently, she'd been suffering abdominal pain since the start of the day.

(On top of that)

The bad luck just kept piling up, as the slight case of sniffles she'd had for some time turned into a full blown case of the cold last night. Because she was shivering, she had taken her temperature this morning and it was 37.8°C. What she was doing may have been detrimental to her health, but she didn't have any comfort margin.

If it had been a normal day, she would have given up right away. But it wasn't, for today she had a university entrance exam.

Naturally, she couldn't spare the time to see a doctor, so she took some medicine for the fever and used every trick in the book to get to the examination center. Her temperature seemed to have gone down thanks to the medicine, but she was suffering from drowsiness as a side-effect. And as an added bonus, it made her stomach ache.

It was in that kind of a state that she took the university entrance exam. She had the feeling that she'd completely filled out the answer form, but looking back at it she had no recollection whatsoever of the type of questions she'd answered or the kind of answers she'd derived.

And with that, she had no idea what the point of taking the medicine was. Those two tablets hadn't made anything better at all.

"Ahh, what was it?"

Yōko was idly watching the side of her face reflected in the glass window as she thought.

Why was she being shaken around by the bus when she was in such a poor condition. Surely the right decision would have been to go straight home after the exam, wrap herself up in blankets and go to sleep.

(There was, somebody)

She tried to fill in the blanks.

She looked out the window, just like she would during class, and the familiar scenery flowed past her.

(There was, something I had to come to school to do with someone.)

So she had come.

It would have been better to do it tomorrow, but tomorrow would be too late. There must have been some reason why she had to come to school today.

But what that was, she couldn't remember.

It wasn't forgetfulness, but more like her body didn't have the strength required to think about it. Her mind still seemed hazy.

What could it have been.

Inadvertently, she glanced out the window again.

"...Huh!"

Yōko stood up without thinking. The view she had seen seemed wrong.

"Damn it."

The slide-show of familiar scenery had finished. Some time ago they had gone past the Lillian's Girls Academy bus stop and were now closer to the next stop.

"Ahh"

Usually there would be a lot of students getting on or off the bus, so there was no need to listen to the announcements. Even if she wasn't paying attention, she'd just be swept along when everyone else got off the bus.

With nothing else to do, Yōko pressed the button to let the driver know she wanted to get off at the next stop. In all the time she had been commuting to school, this was the first time she had ever missed her stop.

Just what you'd expect, since today was probably the worst day of her life.

Part 2.

After walking back from the next bus stop, she entered the school grounds through the main gates.

Having never missed the stop before today, she didn't realize that the next bus stop was closer to the back gate until she was walking through the front gate, and by that time it was too late.

Yōko's head was spinning so badly that she had come to accept that she would make these small mistakes.

Even though she was like this today, she usually conducted herself flawlessly as a senior – possessing a brilliant mind with great judgment and leadership abilities, as well as being beautiful and kind. If her juniors were to see her in such an unfocused state, she wouldn't be worthy of the name Rosa Chinensis.

But right now she didn't have the energy to put up a front.

My stomach hurts,
my stomach hurts,
my stomach hurts,
my stomach hurts.

With each step drawing a complaint from her body that her mind had to assuage, Yōko slowly walked down the path lined with ginkgo trees.

Because the pain is only temporary.

Because it'll get better soon.

I'll endure it for just a little while longer.

Let's just struggle through this like we always do.

Even with her body screaming out in pain, she somehow made it to the statue of Maria-sama.

“...”

She was intending to follow her usual custom and pray, but the scene she saw when she entered into the small garden with its fenced off grove and pond took her breath away.

(...)

There weren't enough people there to call it a crowd, but there were a fair few gathered at the fork in the path.

But if that was all it was, Yōko wouldn't have given it a second thought. Because students stopped to pray on their way to and from school, this place would occasionally see a 'rush hour.' But this group seemed to have gathered for some reason other than that. Although there was plenty of space in front of the statue of Maria-sama, there were only two people standing there.

(This scene is –)

She'd seen this somewhere before. Yōko racked her brain and slowly reeled the memory in. One year, no, two years ago probably. It was definitely something that she'd done. She'd asked her onee-sama, who had graduated last year, and they came down here together.

"Oh, Rosa Chinensis."

The second-year student at the head of the line noticed her, and called out to her with a 'Gokigenyou.' Rosa Chinensis thought she knew her. She was one of Sachiko's classmates. And the girl standing next to her seemed to be a first year. Probably her petite sœur, Yōko thought as the girl embarrassedly imitated her older sister and greeted her.

"Please, go ahead and pray."

The two girls who had been standing in front of the statue of Maria-sama had just departed.

"Are you sure that's okay?"

It would be inexcusable to cut in front of a line of people that were patiently waiting their turn. But the second year girl at the head of the queue shook her head.

"Don't worry about it. None of us want to be a bother to the students who are coming here to pray."

The first year student held a small box in her hand. When she took a better look at the line of couples, in each case one of them held something in their hands.

“Ahh – “

Yōko finally remembered.

The small packages were chocolates.

“Today’s Valentines Day, isn’t it.”

“Yeah... Oh, isn’t that why you’re at school today, Rosa Chinensis?”

“It seems so.”

With a nod, she stepped in front of the statue of Maria-sama. As always, the white face of Maria-sama smiled down upon her with profound compassion.

“That’s why I came to school.”

Just a moment ago, it had all come back to her.

Part 3.

The boutons had agreed to host a treasure hunt for Valentines Day.

Yōko wasn't able to participate because it clashed with her entrance exam, but she had decided from the start that she wanted to see how it played out.

Where had the trio hidden their cards?

And who would find them?

If it was me, where would I hide it?

And who would I want to find it?

Thinking about these things was really fun. But it was something you could only do when your body was cooperating.

“...”

Yōko let out a sigh.

As she entered the school buildings, she felt a heavy flow coming and rushed to the nearest toilet on the first floor. Because it was after school, the toilets were deserted. For comfort's sake, Yōko chose the innermost, western style toilet. When she tried to get up after a brief moment of rest, the world around her faded to black. Helplessly, Yōko sat back down on the toilet seat and waited for the feeling to pass. She hadn't really eaten much all day, so it was probably anemia kicking in.

Anyway, for now she was the sole occupant of the student's toilet block.

“...Hmm.”

She didn't feel well, either. She felt queasy, but probably wasn't going to be sick.

It's just one thing after the other.

The unbearable abdominal pain was gradually starting to get better.

But it was depressing to think that this kind of pain would continue for decades to come.

Until now, Yōko had never had any complaints about being born a woman. That was largely due to school policy and her home environment, so she was grateful to both her parents and teachers.

Neither men nor women were inferior. Because without both, there was no way for new life to be born.

It was simply due to the process of evolution – some distant ancestor had found an evolutionary advantage in this division of roles, and all of this was a result of that choice.

(But even so)

Menstruation, pregnancy, childbirth, menopause.

Yōko sighed, thinking about the journey that lay ahead of her. The gap between the burden born by men and women felt too large simply to write off as the difference between the sexes. The reward of a slightly longer life expectancy wasn't enough to balance things out in the end.

(Ah well, dwelling on it's not going to change anything)

That's why she didn't usually think about it.

She only considered it at times like this. On days like today, when her period pain was excruciating, or when it happened while she was traveling or had PE lessons. Only at times like that.

After resting there for about ten minutes she was feeling better and started to notice the sounds that were coming from outside.

"Where have you been looking?"

"I heard that one of the cards have been found, but I don't know which color it was."

"I wonder which faculty Rei-sama's homeroom teacher is in."

"Where's the weather station?"

From the hallway, from outside. She could hear the students voices.

It seems like the treasure hunt hadn't finished just yet.

"Humm humm humm"

This time the door to the block of toilets was opened, and she felt someone enter the stall next to her. Taking a toilet break right in the middle of the game. It must have been someone who wasn't participating in the treasure hunt. Besides, no one else was humming. They must be in a really good mood.

As she was thinking this, she felt the ground tremble. It was gradually getting closer, and she thought she could hear the footsteps of a crowd of people stampeding outside the building.

(Hey, wait. Who are they chasing after...?)

The school was lively.

All kinds of things happened here, but in general it was peaceful. And fun. Because Lillian's Girls Academy was protected by Maria-sama.

When she finally started to get up, she heard a curious sound.

Bump, scratch scratch, rustle rustle, thump.

"The window! They went in through the window!"

The shout came from outside.

Thud, click, clatter clatter clatter clatter.

It sounded like the fugitive had broke in through the window and then closed and locked it so that the pursuers couldn't climb in.

Just what was going on outside the walls of her cubicle? Yōko was intensely curious. But the person in the cubicle beside her shouted 'What's going on!?' and shot out, so she missed her chance.

"Yumi-san, what are you doing?"

The person from the other stall asked, after first returning to her cubicle and flushing.

(Yumi?)

It was a fairly common name, but she'd know for sure when they responded. Because Yōko's petite sœur, Ogasawara Sachiko, has a petite sœur called Yumi.

She was a rare find nowadays. And she was perfect as Sachiko's petite sœur. Naturally, as the grandmother, Yōko affectionately indulged her.

“...Playing tag, I guess.”

As expected, the voice that answered was that of Fukuzawa Yumi. And it seemed that the person from the other stall just happened to be a friend of hers. Something like that.

“And the treasure?”

“Not yet.”

So that means she was playing tag in the middle of the treasure hunt.

(Yumi-chan, what on earth are you doing?)

Yōko brought her ear to the door of the stall and strained to hear the conversation.

“There we go”

The wall creaked.

(There we go?)

She couldn't fathom it. From time to time, Yumi-chan would do the most outrageous things.

“– Yumi-san?”

Yumi-chan's friend called out, doubtfully.

“After I've gone, can you lock the window? And keep it a secret that you saw me here, please.”

“...Yeah, alright.”

It seemed like she was planning on going back out the window again.

(I see, she's thought about this)

If it was locked from the inside, they wouldn't think that she's fled back outside.

“Well, I'll leave it to you.”

After the sound of someone landing, the window was shut and locked. It seemed like Yumi had safely escaped.

“I wonder what that was all about.”

Yumi-chan’s friend was talking to herself as she left. Yōko shook her head then left her cubicle.

After washing her hands and walking out into the hallway, she ran into the group of students who were apparently chasing after Yumi-chan.

“You girls”

Being a bit of a prankster, Yōko called out to them.

“Ro... Rosa Chinensis!”

All up there was six of them. Simultaneously, they all stopped and stood up straight, as though they had been practicing together.

“Be quiet in the hallway.”

“Yes. Rosa Chinensis.”

Having just been scolded, they momentarily went back to walking then almost immediately picked up the pace and rushed towards the toilets.

(Hey, don’t do that)

As she heard the sound of the door closing, Yōko suppressed a laugh.

Even though they had hurried there, Yumi-chan had already left.

Part 4.

The pain in her abdomen was subsiding.

However, whether it was from the fever or a side-effect of the medicine, her body seemed to be gently floating. It felt like it wasn't being held down by the usual gravity.

That's it. It felt like she was walking through water.

Like she had fallen into a giant fish tank.

The students in the hallway, in the stairwell and outside moved around slowly, as though they were fish swimming.

When she first arrived at school her body had probably been in too bad a shape for her to notice it, but there were an incredible number of students flitting about the grounds. There were more people participating in the treasure hunt than she had expected.

Yōko too blended in with the fish as she walked. Like walking in a dream, she didn't go very fast. But it wasn't an unpleasant feeling.

"Gokigenyou."

A student she didn't know called out to her. A first year, or a second year. At any rate, not someone in her grade.

"Gokigenyou."

Yōko returned the greeting.

"Umm, Rosa Chinensis? Is it okay if we walk together."

"Of course?"

She didn't know whether they were heading to the same place or not, but Yōko agreed to travel with her. Thereupon, another student appeared from somewhere, walking in the same direction while maintaining a respectable distance. After a short while, she too came over and greeted her.

"Just like Momotarou."

Yōko squealed delightedly. Before she knew it, the numbers had increased and in the end she had an entourage of eight students.

"But, why? I don't have any dumplings."

"It's not like that."

The members of her entourage burst into laughter.

“We didn’t come over here because we wanted your dumplings.”

“Huh?”

“We just wanted to be by your side. Or maybe it is the same, and the dog, the monkey and the pheasant just used the dumplings as a pretext.”

The other girls nodded.

“I’ve always wanted to make your acquaintance, but you always seemed so perfect that there was never any opening, Rosa Chinensis.”

“No opening?”

“But I’m glad that I impulsively called out to you.”

“Yeah, yeah. I don’t know why, but today you seem to be gentler, or less intense. It makes it much easier to approach you.”

“That’s a bit rude.”

“Ah, sorry.”

Though she was rebuked by her friend, there was beauty to be found in that student’s slip of the tongue.

“It’s okay.”

Yōko smiled wholeheartedly.

“...Ahh, I see. That’s the sort of image I usually project.”

She hadn’t noticed it herself. She hadn’t intentionally been trying to preserve the majesty of Rosa Chinensis, but that was how she was perceived. She hadn’t wanted to be an honors student. But that was the only way she knew how to be.

“You know there’s always been a fondness for each other.”

Us in the Rose Mansion and the regular students outside. She’d always wanted to get closer to them, to meet them halfway, but hadn’t been able to do it very well.

“Hey, will you please accompany me to the Rose Mansion?”

“Yes, of course.”

Thinking back on it, she'd always been busy. She'd never just aimlessly wandered the halls like this. Never had the time to stop. Never been free to take the scenic route.

Maybe being busy was her way of reassuring herself that she wasn't useless.

When she slowly looked up, the Rose Mansion that she had become accustomed to had an unusual tint to it.

Upon reaching the entrance, the door was opened from the other side.

"Ah, Yōko."

Standing there was Rosa Gigantea, Satō Sei. One of her friends who was also called a Rose.

"I was worried you weren't going to make it. Did you come straight from the exam?"

Sei's usually handsome face was sprinkled with crumbs, making her look foolish.

"What have you been scoffing into?"

Wiping some of the stuff off Sei's cheek and looking at it, Yōko saw that it was crumbs of brown and yellow sponge cake. Perhaps she couldn't wait until she got home and had taken a cake she received for Valentines Day somewhere and eaten it in secret.

"Ahh, nothing. Hahaha."

As she tried to deceive Yōko with an insincere laugh, Sei spotted the group of people behind Yōko's back and beckoned them inside.

"Come inside, cute visitors. Welcome to the Rose Mansion."

"Pardon the intrusion."

One by one, Yōko's companions entered.

"Heavens, what a lot of followers you have. Just like Momotarou."

Happily, Sei saw the situation the same way she had.

"Although regrettably I didn't have any dumplings for them."

"Ahh, in that case we should at least offer them some tea. Shimako and the others are probably still upstairs."

Yōko had warned the visitors to take care on the old staircase so that it didn't break and then urged them upwards when suddenly the entry door was flung open.

“Hey, is it true that the yellow card has been found?”

The new arrival's uniquely shaped tie was crooked. Even her trademark hair-band had faint specks of dust on it.

“Eriko... Ah, Rosa Foetida.”

“Ohh, Rosa Chinensis is in here.”

After greeting each other with ‘Gokigenyou’, Eriko came over to the staircase.

“I don't know much, but I heard a rumor that Rei's card had been found so I came here to check.”

“I just got here this minute, myself.”

Last in line, Yōko climbed the stairs. Sei was leading them, so she wasn't worried about the students who had followed her here.

“Is that so? Oh yeah, you're wearing your coat, aren't you. That's right, you had an exam today, didn't you?”

“Yeah.”

“But I'm sure it was a piece of cake for you, right?”

“Hmm, I wonder.”

After climbing the stairs, they arrived at the meeting room / salon on the second floor. While they were standing in front of the door they could hear the commotion from inside.

“...?”

After exchanging glances with Eriko, Yōko opened the biscuit shaped door.

And then.

“_”

What was going on?

A miracle was waiting for her inside.

A warm room.

You wouldn't call it a huge space, but there must have been close to forty smiling young women inside.

Some were chatting, some were sipping tea and some were hunting for treasure.

Each of them was passing the time as they pleased.

"Eriko..."

Yōko stopped dead. Standing next to her, Eriko squeezed her hand tightly.

"Yeah. Isn't it wonderful."

"There's more."

Sei, who had gone in ahead of them, took them by the hand and led them over to the window. Despite the cold, she opened the window and said 'Well?'

"This is – "

From the second floor window of the Rose Mansion, they could see into the courtyard.

In the courtyard, the number of students gathered was gradually swelling.

"To fill you in, it's because time's almost up."

Sei smiled. It had been decided that the game would end just like it started, with everyone gathered in the courtyard.

"But it's a nice view, isn't it?"

"...Yeah"

From the scattered classrooms and the school grounds, it felt like everyone was making their way towards the mansion.

"Yōko's request."

"Ahh...!"

This scene was what she had wanted to see.

Before she graduated, she had desperately wanted to see the Rose Mansion alive with students. She had wanted to hear their laughter ring out, both inside and outside the building.

"Onee-sama."



The students parted, and she saw the boutons making their way over.

Joyfully she went to meet them, bringing her happiness with her.

“Onee-sama, would you like some tea?”

Sachiko inquired.

“Don’t worry about us. The treasure hunt will be ending soon, right?”

“Well then, I’ll skip ahead a step and give you these.”

Rei put some of the bite sized chocolates that were to be given as prizes to all participants in her hand. In total there were three. She was given Sei’s and Eriko’s too.

“Truly, I can rest easy now.”

Eriko remarked as she was undoing the silver wrapping around the chocolate. The boutons seemed busy as the end of the game drew near.

As she watched her juniors a short distance away, Yōko suddenly thought of God.

A student she didn’t know pulled out a chair and waved them over.

She waved back and was slowly making her way over there as the tears slowly started to fall. The chocolate she had popped in her mouth was enchantingly sweet.

Yōko thought, ‘This is a dream.’

“It must have been bad having your exam on Valentines Day.”

Sei smiled. But Yōko shook her head.

“It’s the best.”

“Huh?”

“Today has been the best day of my life so far.”

The announcement that the game had finished was broadcast.

The best, huh?

That’s probably because she still hadn’t woken up from her dream.

Postscript

“Gokigenyou”

“Gokigenyou”

The clear morning greeting travels through the serene, blue sky.

Today, once again, the maidens that gather in the Virgin Mary’s garden smile purely to one another as they pass under the tall gateway.

– Just kidding.

Hello, this is Konno.

Since this was a continuation of the previous volume, it didn’t have the usual introduction. It felt a bit lonely without it, so I put it in the postscript.

So if we consider “Valentine’s Gift” to be a sandwich, then this ‘Gokigenyou’ becomes the bread. Then you could say that ‘Surprise Chocolate’ is ham, ‘The Yellow Rose Complication’ is cucumber, ‘First Date Triangle’ is egg, ‘The Crimson Card’ is tomato and ‘Rosa Chinensis’ best day of her life’ is lettuce. Actually, I wanted to put pickles in there too. But Sachiko picked them off and it was a huge pain, so this time I gave in. (Lol)

Incidentally, I quite like Sachiko’s hated food item. In my opinion, due to some delicacy, Sachiko has been turned against more adult flavors. In other words, her palate is that of a child. Although I wouldn’t say that out loud.

Conversely, Shimako likes adult flavors. A high-school student that likes Ginkgo nuts and lily bulbs. Too bitter.

In general, Yumi loves sweet things. She should watch out for health problems later on in life.

Yoshino is in the mild faction. (This is the camp that I’m in too. Coffee tastes much better with plenty of milk and cream.)

Ahh, that’s right, Eriko liked the bitter chocolates. Rei’s handmade bitter chocolate truffles.

As for Yōko, hmm, I don't think she has any likes or dislikes. She's the honor student type, who would endure eating something even if she didn't like it.

Rei too seems to be the type who would gratefully eat anything. After you've been working out, anything tastes good, that kind of thing. Straying from the topic a bit, but anything Rei made would definitely be delicious. I'm a little bit jealous of Chisato-san. I wonder what kind of food was in Rei's picnic. Fried chicken would have been good.

And finally we have Sei.

In general she's unreliable. Eating the marble cake when she wasn't sure if it was for her and eating the cheesecake without permission. But, surprisingly, there is something she's fixated on. Like an obsessed fanatic, there's a sandwich she'll always order. (Mustard and salad sandwich, what a strange name). And she prefers chocolate that isn't sweet. Quite annoying.

But, in high school, what did you do when you got hungry? Typically, I'd take lunch with me but occasionally (or often?) I'd buy pastries instead. And I wasn't in a sports club either. Ahh, youth... When you're young, your body doesn't swell quite so much.

Anyway, it was pointed out by her older sister, but this time we've confirmed one of Sachiko's habits.

Her practice of giving handkerchiefs (!) to other people.

To be precise, her current victim, err, recipient is Yumi but it seems like she has given that present away to various other people before.

Thinking about it, buying handkerchiefs embroidered with her initials might mean she's some kind of handkerchief obsessive.

The ones she used during kindergarten and the one she gave to Yumi were distinct items, made from different materials. They were both white, but a white handkerchief is a necessity for a lady. That's the rule.

Finally, a quiz.

What is it that Fukuzawa Yumi has, that Uzawa Mifuyu doesn't?

Answer: Height and hair length, and the letter K.

– That's all from me.

Konno Oyuki

PS

For those of you who don't get it, write out their names using English letters and have a look.